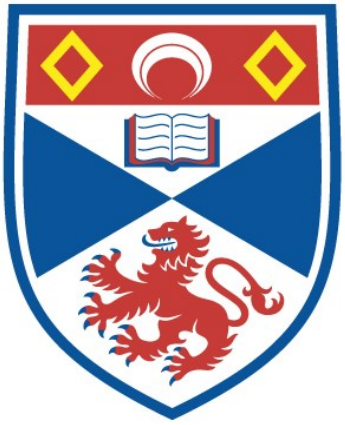
DEVELOPMENTS TOWARDS A THEATRE OF THE ABSURD IN ENGLAND, 1956-1964

Gary William Percival

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews



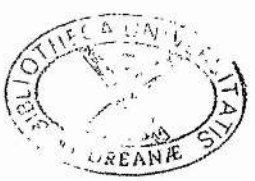
1995

DEVELOPMENTS TOWARDS A THEATRE OF THE ABSURD IN ENGLAND, 1956-1964

by

Gary William Percival

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the University of St. Andrews, September 1994.



ABSTRACT

In 1961 Martin Esslin created the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' as a working hypothesis, a device with which to make fundamental traits present in the plays of a number of France-based dramatists accessible to discussion by tracing the features they had in common. Despite the popularity of Esslin's study, there has been no comparable discussion of England-based absurdism. An explanation for this lack of critical attention may be found in the dogged insistence amongst scholars that there are only two absurd playwrights in the English theatre before 1967. My first aim in this thesis is to redress the imbalance in critical literature, to demonstrate that there existed in England, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, an indigenous expression of absurdism far broader and significantly more complex than that which has been recognised by theatrical reviewers during the past thirty years.

Having identified an indigenous absurdism, I go on to challenge the generalisations and over-simplifications surrounding the English 'absurd', which are a product of its critical marginalisation and neglect. I discuss the complexities of the evolution of the English 'absurd', and the ramifications of its development, paying due regard to the theatrical, historical and social factors which shaped its early growth. The playwrights who represent the genre are examined in turn, and attention is devoted to the details of the development of an absurd dynamic within their works.

The study falls into three parts. Part I attempts to explain why the English 'absurd' had such a limited impact within its own country up until the late 1960s. It is revealed that many of the writers of the English 'absurd' were incapable of divorcing their plays from the social-orientated drama which dominated English theatre in the late 1950s. The cross-fertilization of an overtly social theatre and absurdism resulted in an expression of the genre which was modified and, to an extent, compromised by its adherence to external, political realities. The focus shifts, in the second part, to accommodate those neglected writers of the English 'absurd' who managed to avoid such compromises and who created a more abstract theatre, the aesthetic and epistemological intentions of which resemble those of the French absurd. Part III explains why, despite the relative obscurity of the English 'absurd', a fragmented absurdism managed to be absorbed into the permanent vocabulary of dramatic expression in England in the 1960s. This final section examines the works of a number of non-absurd writers who took on isolated absurd devices as part of an experiment with the parameters of drama, thereby bringing those techniques into mainstream theatre.

DECLARATIONS

I, Gary William Percival, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 100, 000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

date ...15:2:95.. signature ..

I was admitted as a research student under Ordinance No. 12 in October 1988 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in October 1989; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St. Andrews between 1988 and 1994.

date ...15:2:95 signature ...

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of Ph.D. in the University of St. Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

date ..... signature .....

FIRST COPYRIGHT NOTICE

In submitting this thesis to the University of St. Andrews I understand that I am giving permission for it to be made available for use in accordance with the regulations of the University Library for the time being in force, subject to any copyright vested in the work not being affected thereby. I also understand that the title and abstract will be published, and that a copy of the work may be made and supplied to any *bona fide* library or research worker.

date ..15.2.95.. signature ..

SECOND COPYRIGHT NOTICE

During the course of the following thesis I make frequent reference to, and quote extensively from:

(i) unpublished plays by the following dramatists:
Barry Bermange, David Campton, Giles Cooper, Stanley Eveling, Clive Exton, John Grillo, Ann Jellicoe, Donald Howarth, David Rudkin, James Saunders, and Johnny Speight.

(ii) letters written to me by the following:
John Antrobus, John Arden, Michael Bentine, Edward Bond, David Campton, Charles Dyer, Stanley Eveling, Clive Exton, John Grillo, Willis Hall, Donald Howarth, Ann Jellicoe, Henry Livings, John McGrath, David Rudkin, James Saunders, Harry Secombe, N.F. Simpson, Johnny Speight, Raleigh Trevelyan, and Keith Waterhouse.

(iii) interviews given me by:
John Grillo, Ann Jellicoe, David Rudkin and Harry Secombe.

 I realise that I have, in taking excerpts from letters and tape-recorded conversations, been highly selective. If further recourse is needed to material not included here, I will, if the author allows, supply it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I owe a large debt of gratitude to most of the playwrights mentioned in this thesis for the amount of time and energy which they were willing to devote to helping me shape my ideas. Ann Jellicoe, James Saunders, John Grillo and David Rudkin deserve mention for the patience and enthusiasm which they demonstrated during interviews. Thanks also to David Campton, John Antrobus, N.F. Simpson and John McGrath for their detailed letters, with the aid of which my appreciation of their works has been significantly enriched. I extend my thanks to Edward Bond, John Arden, Willis Hall, Henry Livings and Charles Dyer for their commentaries which deepened my understanding of the theatre world in the 1950s and 1960s and enhanced my sensitivity to the times and the atmosphere in which the new theatre evolved.

For the unpublished material which they sent, I would like to thank Clive Exton, Stanley Eveling, Donald Howarth, Johnny Speight, Barry Bermange and the Giles Cooper Estate. A word of gratitude also to Sir Harry Secombe and Michael Bentine, with whose help I managed to reach a maturer understanding of *The Goon Show* and the circumstances which led to its development.

I reserve my warmest thanks for my supervisor, Dr Philip Parry, whose guidance and support have been unfailing, and whose kindness and good humour will never be forgotten.

CONTENTS

PART III: ABSURDISM AND THE MAINSTREAM

APPENDICES

BIBLIOGRAPHY

DEVELOPMENTS TOWARDS A THEATRE OF THE ABSURD IN ENGLAND, 1956-1964

INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I study the various manifestations and deflections of the English theatrical 'absurd' between 1956 and 1964. In order to carry out this task I seek to identify, more closely than has been attempted hitherto, those plays which belong to the English 'absurd'; I discuss the stylistic traits and the dramatic intentions of their authors; and, incidentally, I seek to rescue many plays and dramatists from unmerited critical neglect.

(i)

In only one chapter of the original edition of *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), and a poorly researched chapter at that, does Martin Esslin broaden his study sufficiently to embrace absurdists outside France.[1] In England he acknowledges two playwrights, Harold Pinter and N.F. Simpson, as the sole champions of absurdism.[2] In revised versions of the book, in 1968 and 1980, Pinter and Simpson remain the only representatives of an English absurdism recognised by the author.[3] The problem of the under-representation of absurdism in England is common to *all* reviews of the subject. The most recent critical work devoted entirely to the absurd is a collection of essays, *Around the Absurd* (1990), edited by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn. Three of the essays examine the absurd in England: one deals with Pinter; the other two regard Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1967) and Peter Barnes' *The Ruling Class* (1968) as pre-eminent expressions of English absurdism in the 1960s.[4] In this book, Brater refers to three earlier essays, published in his *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, all of which address the question of the legacy of the absurd on a younger generation of writers.[5] In none of these essays is there detected an expression of absurdism in England beyond the plays of Pinter and Stoppard.[6]

---

[1] Martin Esslin, 'Parallels and Proselytes', in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre and Spottiswode, 1962), pp. 177-232.
[2] Esslin, 1962, pp. 205-30.
[3] Though Esslin does not augment his list of English 'absurdists' in later editions, he expands his work on Pinter in the third edition (1980), devoting an entire chapter to his plays.
[4] Benedict Nightingale, 'Harold Pinter/Politics' (pp. 129-54), Hersh Zeifman, 'A Trick of the Light' (pp. 175-201) and Bernard Dukore, 'Peter Barnes and the Problem of Goodness' (pp. 155-74), in *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, ed. by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1990).
[5] Enoch Brater, 'After the Absurd: Rethinking Realism and a Few Other Isms', in Brater and Cohn, pp. 293-301 (p. 295).
[6] *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, ed. by Enoch Brater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). The three essays concerned are Ruby Cohn, 'Growing (Up?) with Godot', pp. 13-24 (p. 23); John

A widely supported contention is that, in the decade after 1956, England had only two absurdists, who sustained the avant-garde cause until the arrival of Stoppard in 1967.[7] George Wellwarth (1965) and Arnold Hinchliffe (1969) limit their discussions of the English 'absurd' to Pinter and Simpson.[8] Ronald Hayman's examination of "new movements since Beckett" (1979) posits Pinter and Stoppard as the only absurdists in Britain.[9] J.L. Styan (1981) supports the view that absurdism in England is restricted to the plays of Pinter, Simpson and Stoppard, but emphasises the importance of 1968, and the "fringe" explosion, as the first main forum for this type of experimentalism.[10] Likewise, Ruby Cohn's broad analysis of "retreats from realism" (1991) in modern English theatre concentrates on Stoppard and the 1968 generation.[11]

Though the books listed above represent the most comprehensive surveys of post-war experimental and absurd theatre, each one of them fails to take proper notice of the growth of absurdism within England in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The first aim of this thesis is to rectify the balance, to demonstrate that before the arrival of Stoppard, Barnes and the "fringe" writers, Pinter and Simpson were not the only playwrights to develop a form of English absurdism. My research into English drama between 1956 and the early 1960s has revealed a number of other writers in whose works it is possible to detect patterns and themes which demonstrate a close generic affinity with the French absurd.

(ii)

It is possible to identify within the English 'absurd' three prevalent groups. The central group, the 'pure' absurdists, is pioneered by Barry Bermange and James Saunders and, to a lesser extent, N.F. Simpson. The works of these playwrights accord very closely with Esslin's definition of absurdism: dedication to a vision of the human condition dominated by despair; the communication of an over-riding

---

Russell Brown, 'Beckett and the Art of the Nonplus', pp. 25-45 (pp. 40-1); Thomas Whitaker, '"Wham, Bam, Thank You Sam": the Presence of Beckett', pp. 208-29 (p. 213).

[7] Pinter's first play, *The Room*, and Simpson's first play, *A Resounding Tinkle*, were both produced in 1957.

[8] George Wellwarth, *The Theatre of Protest and Paradox: Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1965), pp. 196-220; Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *The Absurd* (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 82-4. Hinchliffe alludes very briefly to David Campton and James Saunders, and mentions that Esslin fails ("curiously") to include them in his list of English absurdists (p. 84).

[9] Ronald Hayman, *Theatre and Anti-Theatre: New Movements Since Beckett* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979), pp. 124-46.

[10] J.L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 2: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 171-81.

[11] Cohn focuses, in particular, on Stoppard, Edward Bond, Howard Brenton, David Edgar, Heathcote Williams, and Caryl Churchill. Ruby Cohn, *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

sense of alienation and futility. Their plays utilise the dramatic techniques with which the absurd is associated: the devaluation of language; the replacement of narrative with poetic images; the internalisation of action. Two other 'pure' absurdists are Ann Jellicoe and John Grillo, though these writers are of lesser significance: whereas the absurd vision connects all of the plays of Bermange and Saunders throughout the 1950s and 1960s, with Jellicoe and Grillo it is limited to only one work.

The second group of English 'absurdists', the 'social' absurd, were incapable of divorcing their aesthetic from the social and political developments in British theatre which were largely the result of the success of *Look Back in Anger* and of the 'Writer's Group' at the Royal Court. The plays of the 'social' absurdists blend social drama and absurdism in an uneasy manner, often using absurd devices to communicate political realities. Harold Pinter, for instance, combines a vague absurdism with social realism in a portrayal of the sub-culture of contemporary England which rivals those of the social realists. David Campton, on the other hand, utilises a variety of absurd devices for a social protest which borders on propaganda. John Antrobus makes an interesting complement to Campton, fusing the techniques of the absurd with those of the English 'nonsense' tradition as part of a wide-ranging political satire.

It is possible to distinguish a third, peripheral, category which is associated with the English 'absurd'. This category includes those playwrights who, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, used isolated absurd devices and motifs as part of their dramaturgy. The works of these dramatists encouraged the absorption of a fragmented absurdism into the permanent vocabulary of dramatic expression in England in the 1960s. Even though absurdism may have had little immediate effect in the 1950s, the gradual and partial percolation of a number of its artistic and epistemological traits into the dramatic consciousness helped to lay the foundations for its acceptance after 1968.

An important consideration in this study will be the extent to which the English 'absurdists' consciously emulate or adapt the techniques of Beckett and Ionesco. These dramatists are given special attention because they were the two absurdists best known in England up until the 1970s. Before 1962 none of Adamov's works had been produced in English theatres and his first two plays to receive production belonged to his political, anti-absurd later period.[12] Genet is also under-represented, having only three plays produced in London before 1960:

---

[12] There is not, as yet, a translated version of Adamov's collected works. Only three of his plays are available, in translation, in England: *Paolo Paoli*, trans. by G. Brereton (London: John Calder, 1959); *Ping Pong*, trans. by D. Prouse (London: John Calder, 1962); *Professor Taranne*, trans. by P. Meyer (London: John Calder, 1962). The translation of *Professor Taranne* is also published in *Absurd Drama*, ed. by Martin Esslin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965).

Les Bonnes in 1952, its English version *The Maids* in 1956, and *The Balcony* in 1957. These plays went relatively unnoticed.[13] Jellicoe, Campton, Simpson and Antrobus had not seen or read any works by Genet before the end of the 1960s, and some of them claim never to have heard of Adamov.[14] Ionesco and Beckett were to gain by far the most attention from producers, directors and critics; these writers were, as far as the English 'absurd' (and most audiences) were concerned, the spearhead of that branch of the French avant-garde which later became known as the absurd.[15]

The description presented above demonstrates that this thesis is essentially a work of archival reconstruction and a general survey and discussion of an important area of absurd theatre which is alluded to only superficially by Esslin and which has been ignored entirely by critics over the past thirty years. As such, I do not, during the course of this thesis, attempt to redefine absurdism, nor do I challenge the central tenets of the movement as they are put forward in *The Theatre of the Absurd.* This thesis does not offer a re-evaluation of absurdism from a theoretical perspective, nor does it present, as its primary focus, a critical analysis of the roots and the development of the movement.

(iii)

Apart from Pinter and Simpson none of the writers of the English 'absurd' considered in this thesis has received more than peremptory analysis or generalised over-views. Most of the published material which bears upon Antrobus, Bermange, Saunders, Campton, and Grillo is restricted to brief references in the two main studies of post-war English theatre: John Russell Taylor's *Anger and After* and John Elsom's *Post-War British Theatre*. With the very limited exceptions of these two books, most reviews overlook the English 'absurdists' altogether.[16] There exists only one dramatic anthology, *Contemporary Dramatists*, which includes all of these writers, though, with the exception of Pinter, none of them receive extended treatment.[17]

---

[13] The editorial notice which appeared in *Encore* in 1957, reviewing *The Balcony*, provides a curt and highly dismissive account of the play. See *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and others (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 28-9.

[14] This evidence is taken from interviews and private correspondence with the authors concerned.

[15] Appendix I provides a list of all of the absurd plays produced in London between 1952 and 1963, demonstrating the preponderance of productions of works by Beckett and Ionesco.

[16] The most recent *Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre*, for instance, mentions only Pinter, Simpson and Saunders.

[17] A tabular study of most of the main critical reviews of post-war theatre in England is available in Appendix II. The table demonstrates that the English 'absurd' has received a remarkably small amount of critical attention.

An aim of this thesis is to compensate for the neglect of most writers of the English 'absurd'. The deficiency has been addressed in a number of ways. In the first instance, the thesis provides detailed reviews of many plays which have received cursory treatment in the past and those which have been ignored completely. Analysis is supplemented by in-depth interviews with many of the writers of the English 'absurd', which illustrates their aesthetic and epistemological intentions in specific plays.[18] Finally, the study includes a large number of plays of the English 'absurd' which have never been published, and some which, though written early in the 1960s, have yet to be produced. Many of these unpublished plays demonstrate an absurd vocabulary as powerful as that of their French counterparts. Critical ignorance of this unpublished material is partly responsible for the limited popularity and limited understanding of the English 'absurd'. Many of these plays are dealt with in detail as they are central to a full appreciation of the nature of the English 'absurd'. These plays are James Saunders' *Dog Accident* (1958), *The Ark* (1959) and *Committal* (1959); John McGrath's *The Invasion* (1958); Johnny Speight's *The Knacker's Yard* (1962); John Grillo's *Gentlemen I...* (1963); David Campton's *At Sea* (1960) and *Comeback* (1963); Stanley Eveling's *An Unspeakable Crime* (1963), and Barry Bermange's *The Cloud* (1964) and *The Mortification* (1964). Other unpublished plays considered in this thesis which demonstrate absurd tendencies and have a strong bearing upon the English 'absurd' are Giles Cooper's *Never Get Out* (1950), *The Owl and the Pussy Cat* (1953), *The Sound of Cymbals* (1955) and *The Lonesome Road* (1961); Donald Howarth's *Sugar in the Morning* (1958); Speight's *The Compartment* (1961) and *The Playmates* (1962); David Rudkin's *No Accounting for Taste* (1960), *The Stone Dance* (1963) and *Children Playing* (1967); Clive Exton's *Where I Live* (1960), *The Close Prisoner* (1962) and *The Boneyard* (1966); Bermange's first version of *Scenes from Family Life* (1969), and John Grillo's *History of a Poor Old Man* (1970).

(iv)

At one point in the rambling, shapeless duologue of René de Obaldia's *An Edinburgh Impromptu* (1963) one of the characters asserts: "There is a logic of

---

[18] Though I acknowledge that there is a good deal of controversy surrounding the topic of writer's *intentions* , this thesis relies heavily on letters from, and interviews with, playwrights, for two main reasons. Owing to the absence of secondary material on many of the writers who are central to this study, I use their own opinions as a springboard for my own discussion. Moreover, I have discovered that the opinions put forward by a number of playwrights have helped me to make sense of, or, at least, added an interesting dimension to, works which have been repeatedly misunderstood by those critics who have never appealed directly to the authors concerned.

the absurd. Credo quia absurdum. The absurd has its laws".[19] This statement appears contradictory when applied to a dramatic genre notorious for its iconoclastic devaluation of established forms and accepted intellectual systems. Nonetheless, absurdism exists as a genre by virtue of the fact that it *can* be defined. Indeed, in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), Martin Esslin identified and labelled 'the absurd' and illustrated its defining characteristics.[20] Since Esslin's pioneering study two monographs on the subject have been published, Hinchliffe (1969) and Brater and Cohn (1990). Two studies, Wellwarth (1964) and Styan (1981), have also made substantial contributions to scholarship on the absurd.[21] The reviews which have emerged since 1961 are important in so far as they have elaborated upon and refined Esslin's definition: Styan, for instance, talks in much greater detail than Esslin about the theatrical circumstances which culminated in the development of absurdism; Brater and Cohn consider the absurd voice of playwrights mentioned only briefly by Esslin (Maeterlinck, Wedekind) and of modern dramatists to whom he does not refer (Fornes). None of these studies posits its own definition of the absurd, nor do these studies challenge the rudiments of Esslin's definition.[22] This section aims to provide a brief introduction to the absurd, and to its defining tenets, as these are set out by Esslin and reinforced by his successors.

Esslin begins by explaining his reasons for using such an obvious umbrella-term for his critical analysis. 'Absurdism' is "a kind of intellectual shorthand for a complex pattern of similarities in approach, method, and convention, of shared philosophical and artistic premises".[23] Absurdism is not a coherently developed dramatic doctrine, nor is it a deliberate and planned movement. According to Esslin, the genre centres on four main authors, Samuel

---

[19] *New Writers, 4* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967), p. 77.

[20] The most comprehensive and detailed definitions of absurdism can be found in Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Pelican, 1980), pp. 19-28, and in his 'Introduction', in *Absurd Drama*, pp. 7-23. See also Martin Esslin, 'Godot and his Children: the Theatre of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter', in *Experimental Drama*, ed. by William A. Armstrong (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1963), pp. 128-46.

[21] All of these studies are alluded to earlier.

[22] Definitions of the theatre of the absurd, all of which concur with the general framework set out by Esslin, can be found in Hinchliffe (pp. 1-13) and Styan (pp. 124-145). There is no comprehensive definition of the absurd in the anthology edited by Brater and Cohn, nonetheless, a number of the essays offer limited definitions: see Ruby Cohn (pp. 1-9); James Knowlson (pp. 57-71); Enoch Brater (pp. 293-301). General definitions of the absurd are also available in William I. Oliver, 'Between Absurdity and the Playwright', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 15.3 (1963), 224-35; and Laurence Kitchin, 'Avant-garde', in *Drama in the Sixties: Form and Interpretation* (London: Faber, 1966), pp. 21-41 (pp. 29-32). Kenneth Tynan's criticisms of Ionesco and of absurdism in general provide some very succinct definitions of the genre. See, for instance, Kenneth Tynan, 'Anatomy of the Absurd', in *Right and Left* (London: Longmans, 1967), pp. 103-5; 'Postscript on Ionesco', in *Tynan on Theatre* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1964), pp. 214-15. It is not the intention of this thesis to redefine the absurd, but to provide a survey of an expression of absurdism (in England) which has, hitherto, been neglected.

[23] Esslin, 1965, p. 9.

Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov and Jean Genet.[24] Though he recognises differences of style and theme in their works, he groups them together in order to examine the variety of techniques and intentions which express their affinity with one-another.[25]

Esslin argues that absurdism, like its surrealist and existentialist predecessors, emerged in reaction to dramatic realism, particularly the convention of the well-made play, which encapsulates a fallacious and outmoded vision of reality:

> The 'well-made play' can ... be seen as conditioned by clear and comforting beliefs, a stable scale of values, an ethical system in full working condition. The system of values, the world-view behind the well-made play, may be a religious one or a political one; it may be an implicit belief in the goodness and perfectibility of man ... or it may be a mere unthinking acceptance of the moral and political status quo. But whatever it is, the basis of the well-made play is the implicit assumption that the world does make sense, that reality is solid and secure, all outlines clear, all ends apparent.[26]

For the absurdists, historical and religious circumstances confirm the untenability of this version of reality: the large-scale waning of religious faith in the Western world; Stalin and Hitler's totalitarian tyrannies; the mass murder and the physical and spiritual devastation of two world wars.[27] Esslin concludes that "for many intelligent and sensitive human beings the world of the mid twentieth century *has* lost its meaning and has simply ceased to make sense. Previously held certainties have dissolved, the firmest foundations for hope and optimism have collapsed. Suddenly man sees himself faced with a universe that is both frightening and illogical - in a word, absurd".[28]

The absurdists are linked in their expression of a new mentality, one which portrays the isolation and fear of man deprived of the reassurance of larger spiritual, rational and moral referents:

> their work most sensitively mirrors and reflects the preoccupations and anxieties, the emotions and thinking of many of their contemporaries in the Western World ... The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been tested and found wanting.[29]

---

[24] Esslin, 1980, p. 24.
[25] The first of the absurd plays to be produced was Genet's *The Maids* (1947).
[26] Esslin, 1965, p. 12.
[27] Esslin, 1965, p. 13.
[28] Esslin, 1965, p. 13.
[29] Esslin, 1980, pp. 22-3.

In tracing the literary genesis of such beliefs in post-war France, Esslin turns to Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942). Sisyphus, condemned for eternity to roll a boulder to the top of a hill, only to have it roll down upon reaching the top, becomes a symbol of the futility of man's life.[30] Camus' central thesis is that man has become a stranger in a world which is no longer recognisable to him, and which cannot be explained by reason or faith. Man's existence is literally 'absurd' in that it is illogical, out of harmony with its surroundings. Here we have the core theme of absurd drama:

> This sense of metaphysical anguish at the absurdity of the human condition is, broadly speaking, the theme of the plays of Beckett, Adamov, Ionesco, Genet.[31]

Esslin acknowledges that the meaninglessness of the human condition had been a theme common to many of the absurdists' predecessors and contemporaries, such as Sartre and Camus.[32]

John Russell Taylor argues that what differentiates absurdists from "existentialist writers" is their attitude to form:

> What distinguishes these ... from earlier dramatists who have mirrored a similar concern in their work is that the ideas are allowed to shape the form as well as the content: all semblance of logical construction, of the rational linking of idea with idea in an intellectually viable argument, is abandoned, and instead the irrationality of experience is transferred to the stage.[33]

According to Esslin, non-absurdists like Sartre "present their sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning".[34] This reliance upon conventional forms and rational argument as vehicles for their philosophy demonstrates an intention remarkably similar to that of realistic drama in that the existential writers "by implication, proclaim a tacit conviction that logical discourse can offer valid solutions".[35] The works of Sartre and Camus contain an implicit contradiction as they attempt to reflect the purposelessness and meaninglessness of the human condition in a style which is logical and polished. The form demonstrates a reliance upon, or belief

---

[30] This is discussed in more detail in Joseph Chiari, *Landmarks of Contemporary Drama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965), pp. 11-14.
[31] Esslin, 1980, pp. 23-4.
[32] The dramatic precursors of the absurd, from the symbolists to the surrealists and existentialists are discussed in Styan, pp. 45-117. See also L.B. Rosenfeld, 'The Absurd in Camus' *Caligula*', *New Theatre Magazine*, 8.2 (1968), 10-16.
[33] John Russell Taylor, *The Penguin Dictionary of Theatre*, rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 8.
[34] Esslin, 1980, p. 23.
[35] Esslin, 1980, pp. 24-5.

in, reason and chronology, a belief which is fundamentally at odds with the content. This contradiction is avoided by the absurdists, who replace *commentary* with *presentation*:

> The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it as being - that is, in terms of concrete stage images.[36]

In absurd plays there is an integration of form and content:[37] an illogical and fragmented structure becomes a direct reflection of man's illogical and fragmented life: "the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought ... [it tries] to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed".[38] Since the world has lost its meaning, the absurdists question the recognised instrument for the communication of meaning: language. All traditional linguistic, structural and stylistic conventions are devalued: by way of comment on the bankruptcy of these conventions and a succinct reflection of the human predicament.[39]

Esslin isolates those techniques, common to all of the absurd writers, which are consequent upon the jettisoning of language. The use of pre- or sub-linguistic devices is especially apparent in the plays of Beckett and Genet. Discursive thought often deteriorates into, or is replaced by, the ancient techniques of clowning and slapstick, miming, pantomime and ritual.[40] The main device used is the poetic image, or a complex pattern of poetic images. Realism, and the well-made play, rely on narrative or discursive thought, which proceeds in a dialectic manner, moving along a definite line of development, leading to a result or final message. The poetic image, on the other hand, defies narrative and conveys a central idea, or atmosphere, or mode of being.[41] Ionesco's works rely heavily on the poetic image, often using the stage itself as the central metaphor. The tone and the prevailing ideas of *Amédée* and *The New Tenant* are not communicated through narrative but are suggested in each case by a central poetic image: the growth of a giant corpse; the proliferation of furniture. In plays such

---

[36] Esslin, 1980, p. 25.
[37] Bernard F. Dukore, 'The Theatre of Ionesco: A Union of Form and Substance', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 13.3 (1961), 174-81.
[38] Esslin, 1980, p. 24.
[39] Esslin, 1965, pp. 13-15. See also Sheila Willison, 'The Language of the Absurd: Artaud and Ionesco', in *New Theatre Magazine*, 7.1 (1966), 9-14.
[40] Esslin, 1965, pp. 15-16.
[41] Esslin, 1965, p. 11.

as Boris Vian's *The Empire Builders* or Ionesco's *The Killer* the set becomes the main poetic image, mutating in accordance with the play's shifting mood.

Esslin argues that absurdism "relies on fantasy and dream reality".[42] One of the main techniques of the absurd, prevalent in the plays of Beckett and Ionesco and in the early work of Genet and Adamov, is the *internalisation* of action, the creation of a dream reality or an inscape: "the Absurdists ... developed a vocabulary and a stage convention capable of putting on to the stage an *internal psychological reality*, an inscape of the mind".[43] Internalisation relies on the rejection of physical landscapes and the narrative chronology of external reality and their replacement by the rhythms and images of the mind. The absurdists:

> never shirk the realities of the human mind with its despair, fear and loneliness in an alien and hostile universe ... The realism of these plays is a psychological, and inner realism; they explore the human subconscious in depth rather than trying to describe the outward appearance of human existence.[44]

Laurence Kitchin recognises in the use of inscape a rejection of facile social and rational considerations:

> Having denied itself all these weapons of traditional drama, what does the Theatre of the Absurd make use of instead? Social realism, perhaps? Definitely not. Apart from its affiliations with political propaganda, realism tends to look on the conflicts of humanity from outside, whereas ... the true field of battle is inside us, in the Unconscious. The Theatre of the Absurd attacks us below the threshold of consciousness, mainly by visual devices and by language in a state of fragmentation.[45]

After *Endgame* Beckett concentrates on developing action on a cerebral level, taking the audience into the subconscious world. The stage also becomes a metaphor for the mind in plays by Ionesco and Adamov: *Victims of Duty* and *The Invasion* are outstanding examples. One of the main premises of Ionesco's plays is that, owing to the unreliability and corruptness of external reality, the existential 'answer' to life should be embedded within the subconscious world. His plays return continually to the image of man descending into the depths of his inscape, only to discover the emptiness at the core of his being.[46]

---

[42] Esslin, 1980, p. 25. This is discussed in greater detail in Part II.
[43] Esslin, 1980, pp. 431-2. See also Richard Schechner, 'The Inner and the Outer Reality', in *Tulane Drama Review*, 7.3 (1963), 187-217.
[44] Esslin, 1965, pp. 22-3.
[45] Kitchin, p. 30.
[46] Richard N. Coe, *Ionesco: A Study of his Plays*, rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 78-94 and pp. 116-33.

Internalisation provides the absurd writer with a means of resolving many potential structural and thematic difficulties. The domestic-emotional concerns of the well-made play and, as Kitchin points out, the socio-political problems of social realism have no place in the recesses of man's subconscious: such concerns belong to the waking world of external reality. The absurd writer can concentrate, without distraction, on greater metaphysical problems. Stylistically, the development of the action on an internal level allows the absurd writer to dismiss many of those defunct rational and causal laws which dictate external reality:

> [The absurdists] put a dream situation onto the stage, and in a dream quite clearly the rules of realistic theatre no longer apply. Dreams do not develop logically; they develop by association.[47]

In the internal world of absurd theatre, causal, spatial, temporal laws are obsolete:[48] plays are usually timeless and placeless (before *Professor Taranne* Adamov refused to include any place-names in his plays); sets contract or expand; characters are often two-dimensional, appearing as grotesques or abstractions; language dissolves or accelerates, as a reflection of the movement of the internal state.

Esslin's argument (above) returns to the issue of poetic images. The dream moves through an association of images: "Dreams do not communicate ideas; they communicate images ... It is in the nature of dreams and of poetic imagery that they are ambiguous and carry a multitude of meanings at one and the same time".[49] Though not all absurd plays attempt to reproduce on stage dreams or reflections of an internal world, they *all* remain loyal to the techniques of internal reality: centring on poetic images; renouncing the physical and the concrete or demonstrating an awareness of physical incongruity; reflecting on stage the rhythms of the subconscious. In this way, internal reality is suggested throughout and the properties and concerns of the external world continue to have no place.

The first part of this thesis examines the works of those playwrights who, despite their attraction to the imagistic devices and dream-rhythm of the absurd, were incapable of divorcing their aesthetic from external considerations. In the early plays of Pinter, Campton and Antrobus, absurd motifs are used as part of a comprehensive exploration of man's social and political predicament.

---

[47] Esslin, 1965, p. 10.
[48] Günther Anders, 'Being without Time: On Beckett's Play *Waiting for Godot*, in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 140-51 (pp. 146-9).
[49] Esslin, 1965, p. 10.

PART I

THE 'SOCIAL' ABSURD

The absurd, as it became known in Britain, acquired a heavily social slant. We cannot call it a 'metaphysical' absurd ... we must think of it as a *social* absurd or even a *political* absurd.[1]

[1] Interview with the author, 28 July 1994.

CHAPTER I

DEVELOPMENTS IN SOCIAL DRAMA AFTER 1956

> It is a fact that after 1956, thematically, deliberately and in every purposeful way, playwrights used economic, political and social Man as a tool for development. In the decade following *Look Back in Anger* theatre in England became an off-shoot of sociology.[1]

The English 'absurd' developed within a theatrical climate to which it was fundamentally opposed: the social drama which dominated the English theatre after 1956 proffered a view of the world and a variety of aesthetic approaches which could not accommodate the abstractions of absurdism. Heterogeneous by nature, social drama was the product of differing and disparate theatrical conventions, none of which accord with the absurd.

One important ingredient of many of the new plays of the late 1950s was an outspoken political commitment, based on an interpretation of reality as a strictly social phenomenon, the genesis of which can be traced back to the Workers' Theatre Movement of the 1920s and 1930s. The tradition of 'workers' agit-prop' or 'working class political theatre' had been marginalised until it came to prominence in the 1950s with Joan Littlewood's 'Theatre Workshop'.[2] Littlewood's endeavours ensured that the techniques and the political ethos of early workers' theatre were assimilated within post-1956 drama, and that an awareness of political realities become one of its fundamental precepts. As early as 1934, Littlewood and Ewan MacColl, in reaction to the insularity and artificiality of popular West End drama, established 'Theatre of Action', a touring theatre company which took short propagandist plays into working class, industrial areas.[3] The manifesto for 'Theatre of Action', which promised to "face the urgent

---

[1] Charles Dyer, letter to the author, 11 October 1993.

[2] Political theatre, combining realism, expressionism and crude agit-prop techniques, had been active in Britain since before the 1920s. On the whole, however, this form of drama never received wide or popular exposure in British theatres, and was relegated to working mens' clubs and public buildings in working class districts. See 'Theatre of Attack: Workers' Theatre in Britain', in *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany and Britain, 1917-1938*, ed. by Richard Stourác and Kathleen McCreery (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), pp. 191-263; Ewan MacColl, 'Introduction: The Evolution of a Revolutionary Theatre Style', in *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop: Political Playscripts 1930-50*, ed. by Howard Goorney and Ewan MacColl (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. ix-lvii. See also Jan McDonald, *The 'New Drama', 1900-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 1-49; Eric Gillett, 'Regional Realism', in *Experimental Drama*, ed. by William Armstrong (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1963), pp. 186-203; Christopher Innes, 'Realism versus Agitprop: D.H. Lawrence and the Workers' Theatre Movement', in *Modern British Drama, 1890-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 69-75.

[3] For MacColl's views on the popular West End or 'drawing-room' theatre which dominated the English theatre after and between the wars, see Howard Goorney, *The Theatre Workshop Story*

and vital problems of today", demonstrates a primary commitment to social and political realities: "The theatre, if it is to live, must of necessity reflect the spirit of the age. The spirit is found in the social conflicts which dominate world history today".[4] When, two years later, the 'Theatre of Action' changed its name to 'Theatre Union', MacColl and Littlewood published a second manifesto which explained in greater detail the importance of a theatre dedicated entirely to the social:

> The Theatre must face up to the problems of its time; it cannot ignore the poverty and human suffering which increases every day. It cannot, with sincerity, close its eyes to the disasters of its time. Means Test suicides, wars, fascism ... in facing up to the problems of our time and by intensifying our efforts to get at *the essence of reality*, we are also attempting to solve our own theatrical problems both technical and ideological. By doing this we are ensuring the future of the theatre, a future which will not be born in the genteel atmosphere of retirement and seclusion, but rather in the clash and turmoil of the battles between the oppressors and the oppressed.[5]

Throughout the 1940s, the overtly political intention of 'Theatre Union' was yoked to a dramatic style which moved away from agit-prop shock devices and closer to the epic. Exposure to Erwin Piscator's set designs, to the expressionist plays of Ernst Toller, and to Brecht himself, enabled 'Theatre Union' to develop the trappings of a rudimentary epic style.[6] In the late 1940s, when 'Theatre Union' underwent a final transition to become 'Theatre Workshop', a permanent acting company based at the Theatre Royal in Stratford East, a third manifesto was issued. This manifesto restates a loyalty to social causes and concludes with a Brechtian clause:

> Theatre Workshop is an organisation of artists, technicians and actors who are experimenting in stage-craft. Its purpose is to create a flexible theatre-art, as swift moving and plastic as the cinema, by applying the recent technical advances in light and sound, and introducing music and the 'dance theatre' style of production.[7]

(London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), p. 2. Despite the popularity of Rattigan, Priestley and Coward, and those 'West End' writers despised by MacColl, it is important to note that these playwrights were not the only prototypes of British theatre before 1956. Though drama in Britain leaned heavily towards drawing-room theatre, there was at least one body of writers, the 'verse dramatists,' which had started to move away from this convention. See Innes, pp. 386-405.

[4] Michael Coren, *Theatre Royal: 100 Years of Stratford East* (London: Quartet Books, 1984), p. 23.

[5] Ewan MacColl and Joan Littlewood, 'Manifesto for the Theatre Union', quoted in Goorney, p. 25. Italics mine.

[6] Ewan MacColl, 'Introduction: The Evolution of a Revolutionary Theatre Style', pp. xlii-xliii, p. xxxii.

[7] Goorney, p. 42.

Littlewood's company toured in Brecht's *The Good Soldier Schweik* in 1938, 1955 and 1956, and Joan Littlewood took the lead role in the English premiere of *Mother Courage* in 1955.[8] MacColl's own journalistic plays, such as *Uranium 235* and *Johnny Noble*, which toured England, sporadically, from 1946 to 1952, use many Brechtian distancing devices.[9]

By 1955, Littlewood's political vocabulary and her understanding of Brechtian theatre were significantly more sophisticated than in 1934.[10] 'Theatre Workshop' (the *only* English equivalent of Brecht's Berliner Ensemble) came to specialise in three distinct types of drama which can be graded in the extent of their commitment to Brechtianism. Primarily, the Workshop was responsible for rewriting the musical, placing it within a relevant contemporary context (usually working class) and weighting it with political themes. These musicals are often openly epic in style and intention: Wolf Mankowitz's *Make Me an Offer* (1959) and Frank Norman's *Fings Aint Wot They Used T'Be* (1962), for instance, contain clear resonances of *The Threepenny Opera.*[11] The second type of play to come out of Stratford East were more-or-less straight plays which Littlewood had helped restructure from a Brechtian perspective: in this way, Shelagh Delaney's *A Taste of Honey* (1958) and Brendan Behan's *The Hostage* (1958) were transformed into quasi-epic pieces complete with musical accompaniment, direct addresses and balladic interludes.[12] Finally, Theatre Workshop produced many local documentaries. Littlewood encouraged writers like Henry Livings (*Stop It, Whoever You Are*) and Robin Chapman (*High Street, China*) to create a type of drama which reflected, in the epic sweep of events, life amongst cross-sections of working class communities, and which mixed together (with deliberate disregard for formal coherence) realistic, expressionistic and epic elements.[13]

Owing largely to the efforts of MacColl and Littlewood, a homespun Brechtianism (intermingled with an elementary expressionism) was absorbed within the bloodstream of the new social drama.[14] 'Theatre Workshop', which

---

[8] Goorney, p. 8, pp. 18-19, pp. 102-3.

[9] Goorney, pp. 201-5.

[10] The mechanics of Littlewood's essentially political directing and producing techniques are discussed in a series of interviews with members of Theatre Workshop. See Tom Milne and Clive Goodwin, 'Working with Joan', in *Theatre at Work: Playwrights and Productions in the Modern British Theatre*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and Simon Trussler (London: Methuen, 1967), pp. 113-22.

[11] Martin Esslin, *Brief Chronicles* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), pp. 87-8.

[12] Coren, pp. 35-9.

[13] John Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 100-3.

[14] 'The English Stage Company' at the Royal Court was also, to a much lesser degree, responsible for the development of Brechtianism in England. George Devine was initially interested in Brechtian theatre and, like Littlewood, attempted to promote it in England. In September 1955 Devine visited Brecht at the Hebbel Theatre and went on to examine Brecht's

became one of the two main forums of the new social drama, advocated a philosophy of the theatre which interpreted reality solely in political, social and economic terms. For MacColl and Littlewood, and for the large number of new writers who they nurtured, reality was accepted as an essentially external phenomenon, located in the political facts of the human being's social condition.[15] The words of Edward Bond, one of the pioneers of the new social drama in England, and also a leading advocate of epic theatre, are a succinct expression of the dominating political ethos of the post-1956 theatre:

> Reality is objective and observable: the economic truths of a factory worker's life are immediately apparent in his work circumstances, his home life, his wage packet ... Reality must not be seen as a dream: we must always find how to show the political structures and boundaries not as alien forces but as processes we replicate in order to exist. Dreams, subconscious mysticism isolate human beings and remove foundations, [this] is always a place of terror and fear.[16]

The forms of theatre developed at 'Theatre Workshop' represents the antithesis of absurdism. Ionesco rejects social and political reality as impoverished. For the absurdists, reality lay *beneath* the political and the observable, it is manifested in the movements of man's subconscious, in his dreams and impulses: the aim of the subconscious theatre of the absurd is to avoid the social surface of life in order to discover profounder metaphysical truths:

> I object to that sort of realism which confines itself to the so called social realities. I believe that this is not real enough. It is only a sub-realism because it stops short at a limited and impov-

---

Theater am Schiff-bauerdamm in East Berlin. Devine extracted Brecht's permission to perform *The Threepenny Opera* as a pre-opening production in February 1956 and to include *The Good Woman of Setzuan* in the opening season. After this temporary enthusiasm for Brecht, Devine lost interest in epic theatre and, after the production of *The Good Woman of Setzuan* in 1956, the Royal Court did not produce another Brecht play until *St Joan of the Stockyards* in 1964. Tony Richardson admits that Brecht never had a real technical impact on the Royal Court. See Irving Wardle, *The Theatres of George Devine* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979), pp. 169-72. For Devine's opinions of Brecht's political theatre, see George Devine, 'The Berliner Ensemble', in *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and others (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 14-18.

[15] A number of new writers, who had no direct association with 'Theatre Workshop', also experimented with epic techniques. John Arden, John McGrath, and Edward Bond each developed and refined a personal version of Brecht's epic theatre. Many writers dedicated to social realism also wrote plays of an epic or pseudo-epic nature. The most popular of these were Osborne's *The Entertainer* (1957) and *Luther* (1961), Robert Bolt's *A Man for all Seasons* (1960), John Whiting's *The Devils* (1961) and Peter Shaffer's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1964). It is interesting that Osborne, Bond, Arden and McGrath all came from 'The English Stage Company'. For general surveys of this aspect of English drama see Nicholas Jacobs and Prudence Ohlsen, *Bertolt Brecht in Britain* (London: Goethe Institute, 1977), pp. 69-71; Martin Esslin, 'Brecht and the English Theatre', in *Tulane Drama Review*, 11.2 (1966), 63-70; 'Brechtian influences: Epic stagecraft and British equivalents', in Innes, pp. 121-56.

[16] Edward Bond, letter to the author, 2 October 1989. See also John Arden's comments in *Theatre at Work*, p. 51.

> erished human reality which has only two dimensions where it should have three. Depth is the third human dimension without which man seems to be incomplete. What possible value can there be in this sort of realism which fails to recognise the most obvious realities of humanity, love, death, suffering and dreams?[17]

Ionesco openly criticises Brecht for his disregard of man's internal realities:

> Brechtian man ... is merely social: what he lacks is dimension in depth, metaphysical dimension ... Brecht's human beings are conditioned solely by social factors ... Brechtian man is crippled, for his author denies him his deepest inner reality; he is bogus, for he is alienated from what truly determines him.[18]

The second forum of the new drama in Britain, 'The English Stage Company' at the Royal Court Theatre, presented obstacles to the absurd which were potentially greater than those of 'Theatre Workshop'.[19] In 1955, the founders of 'The English Stage Company', George Devine and Tony Richardson, published a memorandum, announcing their intention to establish in England "a truly contemporary style of theatre", one which would stimulate a "modern movement" in English drama.[20] According to the memorandum, nothing had changed since Shaw's diagnosis in the 1890s of the social apathy of English drama, hence 'The English Stage Company' would aim to create a *public* theatre, one which would break away from the essentially private and domestic drama encouraged in the West End: "The theatre should be more than just the aftermath of a good dinner. I want to see people so involved in the play and its subject that they are prepared to stand up in their seats and fight about them. This is an exciting time in which to live. The theatre should reflect it".[21] Speeches given in the months which followed reinforce the dedication to social and political realities:

> There had been drastic political and social changes all around us; the new Prosperity State was more than suspect, both political parties looked the same. No man or woman of feeling who was

---

[17] Eugene Ionesco, 'Reality in Depth', *Encore*, 5.1 (1958), 9-10 (10).

[18] Eugene Ionesco, *Notes and Counter-Notes*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1964), p. 139. For further discussion on the limitations of political theatre, see pp. 16-17 and pp. 92-6 (p. 94).

[19] General surveys of the foundation of 'The English Stage Company' are available in 'The Foundation of the English Stage Company', in Marcus Tschudin, *A Writer's Theatre: George Devine and the English Stage Company at the Royal Court 1956-1965*, European University Papers (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1972), pp. 35-41; 'The Founding', in Terry Browne, *Playwrights' Theatre: The English Stage Company at the Royal Court* (London: Pitman, 1975), pp. 1-16; Wardle, pp. 157-89.

[20] Wardle, p. 161.

[21] Quoted in Philip Roberts, *The Royal Court Theatre, 1965-1972* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986), p. 5.

not wearing blinkers could not feel profoundly disturbed.[22]

A commitment to social causes became unquestionable when, in 1956, a symposium was held at the Royal Court, under the title, 'Cause Without a Rebel': Devine's intention was to discuss ways to promote a social theatre in England.[23] The 'Writers Group' was established as a body of new dramatists through which Devine intended to bring about the renaissance in English theatre.[24] Lindsay Anderson and William Gaskill, both avowed socialists, were brought in as new directors.[25]

Devine's intentions were, from the start, unequivocal: to rejuvenate the English stage by injecting a sense of contemporaneity, based on a recognition and exploration of political and social realities. Though Devine's aims are very similar to those of Littlewood and MacColl, the ethos developed at the Royal Court came to differ significantly from that at Stratford East. Although Devine's initial memorandum made an eloquent plea for a flexible and experimental theatrical forum, it was with one type of drama in particular that 'The English Stage Company' became associated. In 1960, four years after the foundation of 'The English Stage Company', Devine received a message from one of his main financial patrons, Ronald Duncan. Duncan expressed his concern that the Company had "constantly produced plays of a social realist kind".[26] Owing in large part to the response to *Look Back in Anger*, the Royal Court had emerged as England's main centre for social realism.[27] Within the first three years of its establishment, the 'Writers' Group' was responsible for producing most of the pioneering social realist plays in England: Michael Hastings' *Yes - And After* (1957), Osborne and Anthony Creighton's *Epitaph for George Dillon* (1958), Doris Lessing's *Each His Own Wilderness* (1958), Barry Reckord's *Flesh to a Tiger* (1958), Errol John's *Moon on a Rainbow Shawl* (1958), Willis Hall's *The Long and the Short and the Tall* (1959), and three of Wesker's plays: *Chicken Soup with Barley* (1958), *Roots* (1959), and *The Kitchen* (1959).[28]

---

[22] Quoted in Tschudin, p. 63.
[23] *The Encore Reader*, pp. 39-41.
[24] See 'The Writers' Group', in William Gaskill, *A Sense of Direction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. 31-40; 'A Writers' Theatre', in Wardle, pp. 167-175; Ann Jellicoe, 'The Royal Court Theatre Writers' Group', in *Ambit*, 68 (1976), 61-4.
[25] Gaskill chronicles the early days of 'The English Stage Company' in his autobiography. See Gaskill, pp. 9-90 (pp. 34-5).
[26] Roberts, p. 5.
[27] Roberts, pp. 5-6. Though 'Theatre Workshop' became established as the centre of Brechtian and of flexible and experimental forms, and 'The English Stage Company' was accepted as the platform for social realism, these categories were by no means rigid. 'Theatre Workshop' was responsible for important pieces of social realism such as Henry Chapman's *You Won't Always Be On Top* (1957) and Stephen Lewis's *Sparrers Can't Sing* (1960).
[28] See 'List of Plays', in Browne, pp. 103-11 (pp. 103-5).

As the dominant idiom of the new drama, social realism presented severe problems for the absurdist. The extreme particularisation of setting which denotes social realist theatre facilitates the discussion of social issues specific to that setting. For instance, the closely observed street in Alun Owen's *Progress to the Park* (1961), "*built in Ruthin red brick that is found only in Liverpool*", on which Catholics and Protestants, and black and white, live side-by-side, illustrates (and allows for a detailed examination of) the repercussions of industrialisation, and the tensions which are consequent on the forcing together of diverse cultural and religious groups.[29] In social realist plays the localised time-scale is also socially expressive; plays are set, for the most part, contemporaneously, in order to demonstrate that the action on stage has immediate relevance to the lives of the audience.

For the absurdist, particularisation of theme and setting is "a fatal mistake, sheer futility".[30] The realist who concentrates on an accurate rendition of the "inessentials" of surface life denies the universal dimensions of existence, located in the sub-social world of the psyche, in which time and place cannot be localised: "the concrete, physical ... reality of ordinary human beings living, moving and speaking ... is an impoverished, empty and limited reality".[31] Beckett argues that fidelity to the "intrinsic flux" demands that the writer avoids surface observations and "the vulgarity of a plausible concatenation".[32] Beckett expresses an overt contempt for:

> the literature that 'describes', for the realists and naturalists worshipping the offal of experience, prostrate before the epidermis and the swift epilepsy, and content to transcribe the surface, the façade, behind which the Idea is prisoner.[33]

The particularised and representational techniques of the social realists are redundant in the inner realms of the absurdist. The absurdist chooses flexible metaphoric structures through which to *present* the vague and abstract vistas of the internal world:

> I have attempted to exteriorise, by using objects, the anguish ... of my characters, to make the set speak and the action on the stage

---

[29] *New English Dramatists* 5 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), p. 83.
[30] *Notes and Counter-Notes*, p. 15.
[31] *Notes and Counter-Notes*, p. 15. Ionesco's views are discussed in much greater detail in Part II.
[32] Samuel Beckett, 'Proust and Three Dialogues: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit' (London: John Calder, 1965), pp. 81-2.
[33] 'Proust', pp. 78-9.

> more visual, to translate into concrete images terror, regret or remorse, and estrangement.[34]

One of the definitive features of the new drama is that it introduced into the English theatre a profound awareness of social causality. As a 'theatre of elegant refuge', pre-1956 West End drama did not, in general, concern itself with social realities, nor did it examine in any depth the causal relationship between a character and his wider socio-political context.[35] Character development was interpreted in terms of an individual's reaction to domestic and emotional (usually romantic) circumstances.[36] The new social dramatists rejected the model of the West End theatre and explored a dramatic avenue which was alien to many of their predecessors, the formative interrelationship between the individual and his social and economic environment.[37] The recognition of, and adherence to, social causality, was, of course, anathema to the absurdists, who not only rejected social determinants, but believed that the patterns of causality which govern the external world (be they social or rational) were artificial and unnatural constructs which served merely to divorce man from his interior self.[38]

In many of the plays of the new social realism an awareness of social causality, far from being tacitly examined, is explicitly vociferated by the protagonist. Jimmy Porter has a heightened social consciousness and recognises in his immediate environment a reflection of the economic and political problems of the country. He is eloquent in his disgust at the political misrule which has

---

[34] *Notes and Counter-Notes*, p. 108. Beckett uses Proust to illustrate the significance of non-representationalism: "The Proustian world is expressed metaphorically by the artist because it is apprehended metaphorically by the artist: the indirect and comparative expression of indirect and comparative perception" (p. 88).

[35] The term 'theatre of refuge' is taken from a retrospective analysis, in *The Sunday Times*, of the developments in English drama since the Second World War. See *The Sunday Times*, 28 May 1967, 25.

[36] Throughout the first half of the 1950s, Kenneth Tynan complained bitterly about the West End theatre, which was non-social and insular. The following comment from 1954 is typical: "If you seek a tombstone, look about you; survey the peculiar nullity of our drama's prevalent genre, the Loamshire play. Its setting is a country house in what used to be called Loamshire but is now, as a heroic tribute to realism, sometimes called Berkshire. Except when somebody must sneeze, or be murdered, the sun invariably shines. The inhabitants belong to a social class derived partly from romantic novels and partly from the playwright's vision of the leisured life he will lead after the play is a success". Kenneth Tynan, *Tynan on Theatre* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1964), p. 31. Tynan's most comprehensive criticism of popular West End theatre, and his testimony to the significance of social drama, can be found in Kenneth Tynan, 'Theatre and Living', in *Declaration*, ed. by Lindsay Anderson and Kenneth Tynan (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1957), pp. 107-29. See also, in the same volume, Lindsay Anderson's essay, 'Get out and push!', pp. 153-78.

[37] Some of the new dramatists, such as Peter Shaffer and John Mortimer, continued to use 'Loamshire' models. However, these writers reinterpreted the format from a social perspective. In Shaffer's *Five Finger Exercise* (1958), for instance, the rather conventional domestic drama is complicated by allusions to the son's homosexuality and by the issue of class tension (embodied in the father-son conflict).

[38] The only causal relationships accepted by the absurdists are those which link one image to another in dream or in the subconscious flux.

reduced him, and the country in general, to such indigence. Throughout *Look Back in Anger* Jimmy's eloquence develops in accordance with his growing recognition that he, and his generation, are the hopeless products of a corrupt and uncaring government. His verbal attacks radiate outwards from self-pity and expressions of frustration at his financial destitution to direct accusations of political misconduct in England and criticisms of the injustice of an élite social hierarchy. Even though Osborne's play retains the hero-focus of the drawing-room drama, Jimmy moves towards political self-realisation, rather than towards the moral or emotional self-understanding which is eventually (and inevitably) granted to Rattigan's Andrew Crocker-Harris (*The Browning Version*) or Priestley's Professor Linden (*The Linden Tree*): Jimmy's personal growth cannot be dissociated from his social growth.[39]

Many of the new social realists adopted Osborne's use of an eloquent protagonist. Each of these, Ronnie Kahn (*Chicken Soup with Barley*), Beatie Bryant (*Roots*), Pip (*Chips with Everything*), Bamforth (*The Long and the Short and the Tall*), Billy (*Billy Liar*), Jo (*A Taste of Honey*) are, like Jimmy Porter, depicted in the process of reacting against a social environment which is insufficient. Jo fights against poverty and sexism in her determination to find independence and Beatie must overcome the conservatism and xenophobia of her family in order to succeed in her political activism. Every one of the protagonists must combat the social ills embedded in their environments, be it poverty, govern-mental corruption, domestic conservatism. They attain social consciousness by seeing through the problems of their immediate predicament to the reality of the larger social problem which it expresses.[40]

Many of the plays of the social realist kind are not so explicit or so verbal in their examination of social causality. Some plays, and particularly those encouraged by 'Theatre Workshop', allow the setting and the movement of characters within that setting, to reflect the causality.[41] The context of Stephen Lewis's *Sparrers Can't Sing* (1960), for instance, demonstrates clearly that man is a product of his socio-economic circumstances. Set in the back-streets of the East

---

[39] Laurence Kitchin writes: "It is no accident that Jimmy Porter is first seen reading the Sunday papers and that he talks about ... new social distinctions and potent political issues. The reality of living had moved ahead of theatrical clichés, and Osborne was raising topics that could achieve present awareness". Laurence Kitchin, *Mid-Century Drama* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960), pp. 99-100.

[40] The examination of social causality dominates the work of some writers. See Edward Bond, 'The Rational Theatre', in *Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1978), pp. ix-xviii; Bond, 'Us, Our Drama and the National Theatre', *Plays and Players*, October (1978), 8-9.

[41] Alan Brien writes that the settings and the objects used in social realist plays "can take on a positive, almost speaking, part in the action ... the sauce bottle, the fried liver, the ironing-board, the case of light ale ... [express] a way of life and a habit of mind". Alan Brien, 'Introduction', in *New English Dramatists* 5, pp. 7-11 (p. 8).

End of London, the play provides a 'slice-of-life', an unforced overview of a typical day in the lives of its inhabitants. In his 'Production Note', Lewis is emphatic that the setting is to be as accurate a reflection of 'real' life as possible. He praises a specific production and encourages directors to emulate it: "The whole thing was very realistic and finished in a material that did look very much like red brick. The doors and windows were practical, the windows containing real glass".[42] The play's setting is as socially revealing as the more specific interactions between the characters. It remains an immovable reality, a permanent visual reminder of those themes which are unfolding on stage: it represents the difficulties of the life which surrounds the characters and the environment which has moulded them, their circumstances and their opinions. In keeping with his claim "I think of "Sparrers" as essentially a story of real people",[43] Lewis provides very detailed notes, explaining the background, appearance and attitudes of each of the characters. This concludes: "the characters should not be considered either "nice" or "nasty" but *real people* trying to live together in a rather overcrowded slum".[44]

There is, in fact, little real plot movement in this play, or in many of those like it. The action appears shapeless, a simple documentation of the ordinary social routine of families living in the East End. The opening conversation between two youths presents a direct and unsensational reproduction of unemployed life:

> PEANUT: Got a fag?
> KNOCKER: No, it's Friday.
> PEANUT: What we doing today?
> KNOCKER: I don't know, but you've got to go down the Labour.[45]

The play has no obvious protagonist, merely a collection of characters who inhabit the street. The women spend most of their time in menial, daily tasks: cleaning their doorsteps, shopping, arguing with spouses. Unemployed husbands are seen fleetingly, en route to the pub or the betting shop. The young men, recently out of school and without prospects, discuss methods of making money.

---

[42] Stephen Lewis, *Sparrers Can't Sing* (London: Evans Brothers, 1961), p. 5.
[43] *Sparrers Can't Sing*, p. 5.
[44] *Sparrers Can't Sing*, p. 8. Lewis's insistence on fidelity of physical and social representation is typical of this type of social realism. The 'Author's Note' to Henry Chapman's *You Won't Always Be On Top* (1957) stresses: "The men, the actors, are English building workers, engaged in actually doing their work. They accept seriously, or protest seriously. Their furies are not self-conscious efforts at being funny, but are their natural reactions to a situation ... They are English building workers, splashing about in mud, carrying this, from here to there, and then being told to carry it back again". Henry Chapman, *You Won't Always Be On Top* (London: Methuen, 1965), p. 9.
[45] *Sparrers Can't Sing*, p. 12.

In the course of the play, one character is reprimanded for hawking illegal goods and another for breaking into his neighbours' gas meters. These images of an ordinary day accumulate to form a clear depiction of the frustration and suffering which constitute working class life.

Violence is a dominant motif. The characters discuss Charlie, imprisoned for repeated brutality towards his wife:

> LILY: Is that the one who got put away for beating up his wife?
> BRIDGET: Yeh, he used to kick her ...
> LILY: Oh, the dirty tyke!
> BRIDGET: Putting it a bit mild, in't it? He nearly done her in with a poker.[46]

The violence, like the crime, the alcoholism and the gambling, is shown to have a clear social determinant. Lewis stresses throughout that *all* of the problems encountered in this typical East End street are a product of a government, a wider society, which has ceased to function responsibly. Charlie may have tried to kill his wife but he is not, to use Lewis's term, "nasty"; he is a direct product of his social circumstances. We learn, through the casual gossip of the women, that he had been abandoned by his vagrant parents, brought up on the streets, "knocked from pillar to post, he was". Deprived of family, education or job prospects, he had resorted to drinking and, inevitably, to crime. In this way the play builds up webs of social causality, whereby everything that happens can be traced to its socio-political roots.[47]

Psychological realism is a development from social realist theatre which focuses on the mental and internal life of the human animal. Since they share a common realm of dramatic exploration, one might expect resemblances between psychological realism and absurdism. In fact there are few similarities between the two genres, for psychological realism is devoted mainly to furthering the investigation of social causality, and does not dissociate itself from the external-ising mechanisms of the social realists. Edward Bond's description of character psychology makes clear the connection between the social and psychological realists:

---

[46] *Sparrers Can't Sing*, p. 25.

[47] The pattern of interpretation applied here to *Sparrers Can't Sing* may be used for many social realist plays. Barry Reckord's *Skyvers* (1963), for instance, depicts life in a large East End comprehensive school. The boys, neglected by their parents and written-off by their teachers, occupy long periods of their life avoiding school, participating in petty crime, and searching for dead-end jobs. Denied guidance and education, they drift inevitably into a hopeless social rut. The setting of the play, the grim concrete expanses of the school, much of which is in disrepair, expresses the social realities of the boys' predicament.

> We shouldn't subtract the political from character, but must talk about politico-psychology ... What we can do is show the political structures which lie at the base of the psyche, to show human beings as cultural beings.[48]

The psychological realists who emerged early in the 1960s took as their basic premise a conviction that the human psyche is determined largely by social forces, and they used their plays to analyse this relationship in detail.[49] These writers attempted to examine the two-way movement between the individual and his social context: they explored, on the one hand, the extent to which social forces alter and disturb the psychological equilibrium of the individual; on the other, they analysed how far the behaviour of the psychologically alienated individual affects his social context.[50] This two-way movement is exemplified in David Mercer's *A Suitable Case for Treatment* (1962) and Johnny Speight's *The Knacker's Yard* (1962). In neither play does the action develop, as it would in an absurdist play, within the mind of the protagonist: the action remains on the rational level of external events, of social reality.[51]

All of Mercer's plays of the early 1960s are based upon the idea that man, as a natural being, a creature of instincts and inherent needs, is stifled and destroyed by an increasingly rigid social context.[52] Stuart Laing argues that in Mercer's works contemporary society is insane because it denies man access to, or expression of, his impulses: "madness [is] an authentic response to a mad society".[53] Laing argues that, for Mercer, "the impossibility of accepting the

---

[48] Edward Bond, letter to the author, 2 October 1989.

[49] There were psychological realists writing in the late 1950s, but the genre never really developed until the early 1960s. Michael Hastings' *Yes, And After* (1957), for instance, is the study of a young girl's breakdown after her hysterical claim that she has been raped. This play explores the social determinants which led to the girl's fantasy of rape and subsequent breakdown: estrangement from her father who is preoccupied with his financial problems; friction between the parents brought on by forced loyalties to their jobs; the family's refusal to treat the girl as an emotionally and intellectually independent being.

[50] *Encore*, the most popular magazine on modern theatre in the 1950s and 1960s, was founded in 1956 to support the development of the social drama. According to Charles Marowitz, one of its leading reviewers, the primary intention of the magazine was to promote the precepts which governed social and psychological realism: "The aesthetic priority of *Encore* magazine was 'engagement' which, loosely translated, meant psychological-realism at the service of politically-oriented plays". *The Encore Reader*, p. 7.

[51] In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the number of non-absurd British plays in which the action is internalised is extremely limited. The brief dream sequences in Osborne's *Luther* and Whiting's *The Devils* are, as opposed to serious attempts at exploring internal reality, devices to demonstrate the extent to which social and political circumstances have affected the protagonist. The dreams of Martin and Grandier reflect, in the succession of images, a profound desire to shelter a unique vision from the totalitarian and intolerant forces of the Church. The extended dream sequences in Bernard Kops' *The Dream of Peter Mann* (1960) do not adhere to the mood or movement of the dream: the play remains loyal throughout to the rhythms of external reality. At the end of *Yes, And After*, the closest that Hastings allows us to Cairy's internal reality is a prolonged instance of sleep-talking.

[52] The early plays are listed and discussed briefly in Taylor, pp. 315-6.

[53] Stuart Laing, 'Introduction' to *Mercer, Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. ix-xviii

prevailing political and social reality leads to fantasy and personal breakdown".[54] In *A Suitable Case for Treatment* Morgan, as a natural animal, cannot conform to, or abide by, the artificial codes of the social animal: he becomes "the stateless person, the dispossessed person, the alienated person".[55] Morgan is alienated from the primary social institutions: he is rejected from the family (he is in the process of being divorced by his wife); the peer group (his best friend is taken on as his wife's lover); the economic sphere (he loses his job). In his increasing distraction he seeks assistance from his parents and from professional medical bodies: these wider social institutions are disturbed by his unorthodox behaviour and withdraw their support.[56] Morgan's attempts to verbalise his confusion exacerbate his alienation. When he is castigated by a policeman for sleeping in his car his response reflects his predicament:

> POLICEMAN: That's an assault, technically speaking.
> MORGAN: Is there anything which is not, technically speaking, an assault? Birth. School. Work. Sex. Life. Consciousness. Death.[57]

At moments of crisis Morgan resorts to a fantasy in which he envisages himself as a gorilla.[58] For him, the gorilla is an expression of free existence, of fidelity to natural impulses:

> MORGAN: If I'd been planted in the womb of an orang-outang, none of this would ever have happened - Man lacks continuity with Nature. (p. 110)

Mercer's statement in this play is unequivocal: man and society do not mix; the various institutions which have been created to facilitate the successful operation of society (education, the family, marriage) each serve to alienate the individual even further. Psychological breakdown is the only possible consequence of existence within artificial social constructs which sever contact with natural impulses.

(p. xii).

[54] Laing, p. xiii.

[55] David Mercer, 'Mercer on Mercer' in *Mercer, Plays: One*, pp. xix-xxii (p. xx).

[56] Arnold Hinchliffe argues that Mercer's main themes of psychological alienation and man's attempt to define himself as a private individual are based on the work of R.D. Laing and his studies in schizophrenia. As far as R.D. Laing (and Mercer) are concerned, the individual cannot establish independence within the social collective. Any attempt to do so results in social alienation and destruction. See Hinchliffe, *British Theatre, 1950-70* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), p. 146.

[57] David Mercer, *Mercer, Plays: One*, p. 79.

[58] *The Governor's Lady* (1965) also uses the image of the gorilla to symbolise the psychological collapse of the protagonist as a consequence of her inability to accept the prevailing social reality.

For Speight, man's insanity is symptomatic of a social environment which has deteriorated into corruption and moral atrophy. Set in a London slum, *The Knacker's Yard* depicts the social world at its basest and, in Speight's terms, its purest level. The boarding house, which is the focus of attention, is unfit for human habitation. The rooms are without electricity or furniture, and are in a state of decay: "*A window in the far wall, the bottom half covered by an old and dirty piece of curtaining. A crack in one of the panes. And a piece of brown paper replacing another*".[59] The landlord refuses to provide any material comforts for his tenants as this would entail a detraction from his own income. The casual cruelty of the landlord, his inhumanity to his poorer tenants, is reflected in his behaviour towards dogs: each evening he roams the streets looking for stray dogs which, once secured, are locked in hutches in the basement. The predicament of the dogs, cramped together and stacked one on top of the other, provides a deliberate parallel with the situation of those who live in the house.

The society beyond the boarding house is also in a state of moral and physical disrepair. Martin, a lodger, acts as a chorus to the ills of the wider society. An insufficient welfare system has forced him to go out begging in the streets. People's refusal to part with their money has driven him to increasingly fantastic ruses, including an elaborate pretence of suicide. Martin's desperate schemes become a clear indictment of a society which has ceased to function on a humane level:

> I told 'em straight ... I'm fed up I said, I'm fed up with it all. No food I ain't had, no breakfast, I might as well be dead. And I'm going to end it I said ... I said it to 'em ... I said I'm going to chuck myself under the next train that comes in ... and not one of them ... comes forward to stop me ... I could have gone and done it for all they'd care. (p. I.24)

Through episodes such as this Speight gradually constructs the image of a society devoid of compassion, in which economics takes precedence over people. The conversation touches upon subjects relevant to their environment: urban squalor; the spread of crime (indeed, a murderer is terrorising the East End communities slitting women's throats); racist attacks; mass unemployment. Beyond the East End, the problems are magnified:

> I had some meat the other day, four years old it was. Deep freeze stuff, they keep it for years in those ice boxes ... Malnutrition in hermetically sealed bags. Frozen peas and the H bomb, that's the menu for this country. (p. III.8)

---

[59] Johnny Speight, *The Knacker's Yard* (1962), unpublished, p. I.1.

A dysfunctional society inevitably creates a warped mentality. Ryder, the central character, is just such a creation. He is sensitive to the social decay and voices his disgust frequently:

> That's the trouble with our society ... waste ... too much waste ... Look around you ... everywhere ... all you can see is waste ... everything's wasting ... wasting away ... and muck ... (p. I.22)

Though he has set himself a mission to purge society of the "muck" and "filth", Ryder is aware that, as a social animal, he has internalised the corruption, and that the process of purification must end in self-destruction.

Purgation is undertaken in stages, each one of which involves an inversion, or diseased reinterpretation, of a civil ritual, and which marks Ryder's steady decline into insanity. In the first instance, Ryder constructs an altar from photographs of the royal family. Each evening he conducts a ceremony over the altar during which pornographic pictures are ritualistically slashed. The destruction of the pin-ups represents an attempt to exorcise the country's spiritual decay; hence, the procedure adopts the trappings of a religious ceremony. The makeshift altar replaces the spiritual with the civil (the pictures of the royalty) and Ryder sings 'God Save the Queen' instead of a holy incantation. In the second instance, Ryder invites Martin, the beggar, to a grotesquely formal dinner in his room. For Ryder, the meal is an opportunity to rebuke that human canaille which he believes to be destroying his society: he does so by bringing the tramp into a "respectable" and "civil" situation and degrading him by forcing him to eat cat-food. When his guest has fled the room, Ryder prepares for the final stage in the purgation of the country, his suicide. The 'knacker's yard', a derogatory term for a slaughter-house, is a convenient image for society. Ryder, psychologically crippled by his social context, is quickly and effectively destroyed by it.[60]

The plays of the social realists and Brechtians demonstrate that man is defined by, and can only be understood in relation to, his social conditions; the psychological realists argue that the link between man and society is so profound that an imbalance in one will invariably affect the other. After 1956, man was interpreted and portrayed as a specifically social and political phenomenon, and realists and Brechtians alike devised constructs to make this apparent. The English 'absurdists' could not possibly ignore the overtly social nature of the new theatre which was antithetical in the extreme to the abstractions of the French absurd. Some of the new writers responded by adapting the techniques of the

---

[60] See Taylor, pp. 303-4.

French absurd to the aesthetic of the new social drama. Harold Pinter was the first of the 'social' absurdists in England.[61]

* * *

The widely held misconception that Pinter is a 'pure' absurdist, or "the central British playwright of what Martin Esslin has called the Theatre of the Absurd",[62] has been disputed extensively during the last decade. Since 1983 Pinter has written a succession of overtly anti-authoritarian plays. Critics, searching for the genesis of his political convictions, have unearthed power models and political metaphors in those early works which were popularly regarded as esoteric and abstract. Pinter is being reinvented as a social writer, a dramatist who was keenly aware and firmly a part of the post-1956 social drama movement, and a thorough excavation of the social and political dimensions of his 'absurdism' is being undertaken.

The link between Pinter and the 'pure' absurd was forged initially in 1958. With rare exceptions, the British press responded to *The Birthday Party* as a poor imitation of the metaphysical theatre of Beckett and Ionesco: "If the author can forget Beckett, Ionesco and Simpson, he may do much better next time"; "This essay in surrealistic drama ... gives the impression of deriving from an Ionesco play which M. Ionesco has not yet written".[63] Though Pinter rejected, at the time, a surrealist legacy, and intimated that *The Birthday Party* contained social over-

---

[61] Brief biographical sketches, of the type seen here, are provided for all of the main dramatists considered in this thesis. The purpose of these biographies is to contextualise the writers concerned, demonstrating, where possible, their social and educational backgrounds. This information may furnish the reader with an extra dimension to the works of these playwrights.

Harold Pinter. British. Born in Hackney, London, on 10 October 1930. Educated at Hackney Downs Grammar School, 1943-47; Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, 1948. Conscientious objector: no military service. Married the actress Vivien Merchant in 1956 (divorced in 1980). A second marriage to the writer Lady Antonia Fraser in 1980. Professional actor, 1949-60; also an associate director with the National Theatre from 1973-83, and with United British Artists in 1983. Since 1988 he has been an editor and publisher with Greville Press. See also *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by K.A. Berney, 5th edn (London: St. James Press, 1993), pp. 529-30.

[62] Philip Barnes, *A Companion to Post-War British Theatre* (London: Croom Helm, 1986), pp. 182-5 (p. 182).

[63] See *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, ed. by John Elsom (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), p. 83. For a selection of contemporary reviews of *The Birthday Party*, see Elsom, pp. 80-6; *The Encore Reader*, pp. 76-8, 89-91.

tones,[64] the notices for *The Caretaker*, two years later, continued to stress his connection with the French avant-garde.[65]

It was not until the publication, in 1961, of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, that the Pinter-Beckett-Ionesco nexus was firmly established and popularised. Esslin expanded the umbrella label of 'the absurd' to include Pinter, and interpreted his plays as allegories of the human condition which belonged clearly within the Beckettian tradition. Esslin's argument was straightforward: each of Pinter's plays examines the gradual encroachment upon the isolated and vulnerable individual of the darkness or chaos which lies at the periphery of his existence (the "vast ocean of nothingness from which we gradually emerge after birth and into which we sink again when we die"[66]). In his earliest works, *The Room* (1957), *The Birthday Party* (1957) and *The Dumb Waiter* (1960), the central character is extracted from the precarious safety of his hermetically sealed environment and reclaimed by the forces of the "undefined fear" or the "nameless menace".[67] *The Caretaker* (1960) reverses this dynamic, for in this play "we have a man *seeking* for a place for himself, fighting for that little patch of light and warmth in the vast menacing darkness".[68] In an essay written immediately after the publication of *The Theatre of the Absurd* in England, Esslin discussed at length the relationship between Beckett and Pinter, and argued that Pinter's plays were metaphors for the collapse of the consciousness, subsequent to the recognition of its own mortality:

> All rooms have doors; wherever we are, we are separated from the unknown, the vast darkness of the universe and its mystery, from death, by the thinnest and flimsiest of partitions. Our own consciousness, our awareness of ourselves is a small pool of light surrounded by a vast outer darkness ... It is this feeling which is dramatised.[69]

Throughout this essay, Esslin is insistent that Pinter's allegories cannot accommodate social or political considerations: "He is not concerned with social questions, he fights for no political causes. Like Beckett he is essentially

---

[64] See Harold Pinter, 'A Letter to Peter Wood', in *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party; The Caretaker; The Homecoming*, Casebook Series, ed. by Michael Scott (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 79-82 (p. 82).
[65] For a selection of contemporary reviews of *The Caretaker*, see *Plays in Review 1956-1980: British Drama and the Critics*, ed. by Gareth and Barbara Lloyd-Evans (London: Batsford, 1985), pp. 96-9; Malcolm Page, *File on Pinter* (London: Methuen, 1993), pp. 20-8.
[66] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre and Spottiswode, 1962), pp. 206-7.
[67] Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 206 and p. 207.
[68] Martin Esslin, 'Godot and His Children: The Theatre of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter', in *Experimental Drama*, pp. 128-46 (p. 142).
[69] Esslin, 'Godot and His Children', pp. 140-1.

concerned with communicating a 'sense of being', with producing patterns of poetic imagery".[70]

The Theatre of the Absurd proved to be extremely influential and was to colour the critical and the popular reception of Pinter's plays during the following two decades. A number of studies reinforced Esslin's assertion that Pinter was Britain's only 'pure' absurdist, comparable in his dramatic vision to Beckett and Ionesco: J.L. Styan argued that Pinter was "a light-heavyweight Beckett" and regarded *The Birthday Party* as an exploration of "the horrors of the subconscious hell";[71] according to R.D. Smith "Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter remove their characters from immediate social contexts ... [and] transcend social and linguistic frontiers" in their search for a universal dramatic language with which to communicate "the anguish and perplexity" which in fundamental to the human condition";[72] George Wellwarth analysed Pinter's plays as "existential parables";[73] and A.D. Choudhuri discussed his work in terms of their "delineation of fundamental human situations, free from accidents of social consideration and political affiliation".[74]

Though renowned for his reluctance to comment on his own works, Pinter was not entirely silent during the 1960s and 1970s. From the few interviews and speeches which he agreed to make, two interconnected motifs are discernible: the rejection of abstract interpretations of his plays and allusions to concrete, social themes. Pinter's assertion, in 1960, that he was "against symbolism", and that "there's nothing symbolic about anything I write", was reiterated on an number of occasions in the following decade.[75] In 1962, the same year as the publication in Britain of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, he was emphatic in his dismissal of Esslin's theories:

> The context has always been, for me, concrete and particular, and the characters concrete also. I've never started a play from any

---

[70] Esslin, 'Godot and His Children', p. 140.

[71] J.L. Styan, *The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 235-8 (p. 236).

[72] In his 'Notes', Smith refers to Esslin's book as essential reading. R.D. Smith, 'Back to the Text', in *Contemporary Theatre*, Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 4, ed. by John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), pp. 116-37 (p. 135).

[73] George E. Wellwarth, *The Theatre of Protest and Paradox: Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1965), pp. 197-211.

[74] A.D. Choudhuri, *Contemporary British Drama: An Outsider's View* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1976), pp. 80-120 (p. 91). The type of interpretation put forward by Esslin and Choudhuri has been taken to extremes by some reviewers. Gabbard, for example, argues that all of Pinter's plays are based upon universal dream or fantasy models, centring around archetypal Oedipal patterns. See Lucina Paquet Gabbard, *The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays: A Psychoanalytic Approach* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976), pp. 15-40.

[75] Philip Purser, 'A Pint with Pinter Helps to Dispel the Mystery', *News Chronicle*, 28 July 1960, 6.

> kind of abstract idea or theory and never envisaged my characters as messengers of death, doom, heaven or the milky way.[76]

This theme peppered his commentary throughout the next ten years. In an interview for *The New York Times* in 1971, he denied fervently that his plays dealt in "mystery", "secrecy" or "enigma", and concluded by attacking those writers who attempted to generalise and universalise: "It has to be absolutely specific. If it's generalised then it's nothing else but indulgence and it's illegitimate".[77]

In order to substantiate his assertions, Pinter has made a number of references to his social orientation. In 1958, in a letter to Peter Wood, the director of *The Birthday Party*, he described Goldberg and McCann as "Dying, rotting, scabrous, the decayed spiders, *the flower of our society*".[78] His summary of the play suggests a profound awareness of political realities:

> the hierarchy, the Establishment, the arbiters, the socio-religious monsters arrive to effect alteration and censure upon a member of the club who has discarded responsibility.[79]

The pressures towards social conformism, and the inhumanity of the political agents who demand conformity, are explored openly in Pinter's next play. In an interview with Lawrence Bensky in 1966, Pinter admitted that *The Hothouse* was inspired by his hatred of political malpractice and intended as an overtly political satire:

> [*The Hothouse* is] about an institution in which patients were kept: all that was presented was the hierarchy, the people who ran the institution; one never knew what happened to the patients or what they were there for or who they were. It was heavily satirical.[80]

Pinter has acknowledged that a central scene of *The Hothouse*, the interrogation of one of the patients, ostensibly a 'treatment' for mental defectives, was intended as a specific example of political torture: "It's supposed to be a mental home, but I don't think it is ... It's a home for political dissidents".[81] Prolonged discussions of

---

[76] Harold Pinter, 'Writing for the Theatre', quoted in *Plays: One*, rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 9-16 (pp. 10-11). See also Pinter's speech from 1961 in which he argues that *The Caretaker* is a "straightforward and simple play". Harold Pinter, 'Writing for Myself', in *Plays: Two*, rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1979), pp. 9-12 (p. 10).

[77] Quoted in Mel Gussow, *Conversations with Pinter* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994), pp. 15-47 (p. 29, 43).

[78] 'A Letter to Peter Wood', p. 81. Italics mine.

[79] 'A Letter to Peter Wood', p. 82.

[80] Lawrence M. Bensky, 'An Interview with Harold Pinter', in *Theatre at Work*, pp. 96-109 (p. 104).

[81] Anna Ford, 'Harold Pinter's Radical Departures', *The Listener*, 27 October 1988, 4-6 (5).

his political involvement, and his awareness of social injustice, recur in Pinter's conversations with Mel Gussow, Miriam Gross and Bryan Appleyard.[82]

During the 1980s, Pinter became increasingly outspoken on the subject of his early works. In an interview in 1985, he dismissed entirely Esslin's abstract rendition as "absurd rubbish", and insisted that the early plays are governed by political metaphors.[83] *The Dumb Waiter*, for example, is described as an analysis of conformism and authoritarianism:

> the chap who is upstairs and is never seen is a figure of authority. Gus questions this authority and rebels against it and therefore is squashed at the end ... The political metaphor was very clear to the actors and director of the first production in 1960. It was not, however, clear to the critics of the time.[84]

Pinter goes on to discuss the political metaphors which inform the structure of other early pieces:

> *The Birthday Party*, which I wrote more or less at the same time, in 1957, again has a central figure who is squeezed by certain authoritarian forces ... *The Hothouse* - which actually followed quite shortly, the next year, I think - is essentially about the abuse of authority.[85]

Since 1985, each of the interviews given by Pinter has served to reconfirm that political structures exist in his early works. In 1988, he told Anna Ford that:

> My earlier plays are much more political than they seem on the face of it ... I think that the plays like *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter* and *The Hothouse* are metaphors, really. When you look at them, they're much much closer to an extremely critical look at authoritarian postures - state power, family power, religious power, power used to undermine, if not destroy, the individual, or the questioning voice, or the voice which simply went away from the mainstream and refused to become part of an easily recognisable set of standards and social values.[86]

In a series of talks with Mel Gussow, two months later, Pinter discussed in greater detail the "social and political structures" which inform *The Birthday Party*, *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Hothouse*, *The Servant*, and *The Homecoming*:

---

[82] Gussow, p. 71; Miriam Gross, 'Pinter on Pinter', *The Observer*, 5 October 1980, 25 and 27 (25); Bryan Appleyard, 'The New Light that Burns Within Harold Pinter', *The Times*, 16 March 1984, 13.

[83] Nicholas Hern, 'A Play and its Politics: A Conversation between Harold Pinter and Nicholas Hern', in *One for the Road* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 7-23 (p. 10).

[84] Hern interview, p. 7.

[85] Hern interview, p. 8.

[86] Ford interview, 6.

> the question of how power is used and how violence is used, how you terrorise somebody, how you subjugate somebody, has always been alive in my work.[87]

The prevailing image of the intruder, who is, for Esslin, a symbol of death and, as such, central to the absurd interpretation, is, in fact, based on a historical-political prototype and provides the focal element of Pinter's power models:

> The idea of the knock came from my knowledge of the Gestapo. I'll never forget: it was 1953 or 1954. The war had only been over less than ten years. It was very much on my mind.[88]

Pinter's famous assertion at the beginning of his career that each of his characters "are scared of what is outside the room. Outside the room there is a world bearing upon them which is frightening" refers not to man's recognition of the abstract terror which will inevitably bear down on him, but to the fate of the thousands of Jews in Nazi Germany.[89] The door does not separate man from, as Esslin would have us believe, "the universe and its mysteries"; it is the only partition between a whole nation and the concentration camp. For a young Jewish man growing up in an intolerant and xenophobic East End in the 1930s, the reality of persecution and oppression was always immediate. Pinter has several times told interviewers of incidents of violence and abuse brought upon him as a young man by pro-fascists: "I went to a Jewish club, by a railway arch, and there were quite a lot of people often waiting with broken bottles".[90] Allusions to the Gestapo ("the knock" and the image of intrusion) reinforce the political leanings of the plays, and anchor the activity in Pinter's personal history.

A number of reviewers have been sensitive to Pinter's assertions and, during the 1960s and 1970s, a body of criticism developed which challenged Esslin's claim that Pinter's work was divorced from the social and which, by extension, queried his status as a 'pure' absurdist. These studies were spear-

---

[87] Gussow, p. 73. See also p. 113.

[88] Gussow, p. 71. Pinter's claims are corroborated by similar statements made in 1960: "this thing, of people arriving at the door, has been happening in Europe in the last twenty years. Not only the last twenty years, the last two or three hundred". Quoted in Innes, pp. 279-97, (p. 282).

[89] Harold Pinter, interview with Kenneth Tynan, B.B.C. Home Service, 28 October 1960.

[90] Bensky interview, pp. 106-7. Simon Trussler's study in 1973 suggests a close relationship between Pinter's works and his experience as a young man. Trussler argues that the violence and the regimes of terror which inform Pinter's works may be traced to the hostility which he encountered as a youth: "Pinter's own cultural inheritance of Jewishness, unlike Wesker's, can be sensed in the subtext rather than the subject matter of his plays, so that here an assimilated sense of persecution erupts in a seedy suburban microcosm" (p. 33). Simon Trussler, *The Plays of Harold Pinter: An Assessment* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973), pp. 33-4, 40-1. The connection between Pinter's experience as a young Jew and the social colouring of some of his plays is discussed at length in Ehud Manor, 'The Anglo-Jewish Predicament in the Plays of Bernard Kops, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter and Peter Shaffer' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1985), pp. 86-168.

headed by Tom Milne (1960),[91] John Bowen (1961),[92] and Ruby Cohn (1962),[93] all of whom recognised socio-political overtones in the early plays. Despite these reviews, the 'pure' absurdist label has been tenacious. As late as 1986, Philip Barnes was offering wholly metaphysical interpretations of Pinter's plays, positing them as concretisations of "the ambiguities of human existence" and metaphors for "an unknown, metaphysical and horrendous nothingness and mystery beyond the here and now".[94] It was not until the middle of the 1980s and the early 1990s that the political structures in Pinter's plays came to be explored in detail.

According to Graham Woodroffe, the political constructs which inform *The Caretaker* are expressed on both literal and metaphoric levels. In his essay, 'Taking Care of the "Coloureds": The Political Metaphor of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*' (1988), Woodroffe suggests that Pinter's works (and, indeed, all literary works) are as much a product of their society as of an individual psychology and, as such, contain non-conscious representations of the social and political life of Britain at the time of writing. *The Caretaker* is particularly rich in allusions to the issues of immigration and racism which were prevalent political concerns in the early 1960s. These problems are first alluded to when Mick queries the identity of Davies, who is deliberately evasive about his background: "You a foreigner ... Born and bred in the British Isles?". Mick rejects the tramp's claim that he is called 'Davies' and cajoles him into revealing his true name, 'Jenkins'. When Mick repeats the name, "Jen...kins", the insertion of the caesura allows one to hear 'kin of Gentiles', suggesting that the choice of an assumed name betrays an attempt to conceal racial origins. From this point, Woodroffe

---

[91] Milne was perhaps the first reviewer to interpret *The Birthday Party* as an allegory of the social pressures towards conformism. He argues that Goldberg and McCann represent authority in general: "big business, the church, the I.R.A.". Milne discusses the movement of the play in terms of political metaphor: "Stanley has rejected society ... Society, in the shape of Goldberg and McCann, takes its revenge". Tom Milne, 'The Hidden Face of Violence', in *Encore*, 7.1 (1960), 14-20 (18). Boulton (1963) extends Milne's argument: he discovers, in the interrogation scenes of *The Birthday Party*, patterns which suggest that Goldberg and McCann are I.R.A. agents who have been sent to reclaim a renegade member. James T. Boulton, 'Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker* and Other Plays', in *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Arthur Ganz (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 93-104 (p. 99).

[92] Bowen rejects the idea that Pinter's landscapes are abstract and Beckettian; he stresses that the plays are contextualised in the social and, as such, deal with subjects appropriate to the social world: "Mr Pinter's buses really run; his observation may be appalled, but it is exact. His characters do not use language to show that language doesn't work; they use it as a cover for their fear and loneliness". John Bowen, 'Accepting the Illusion', *The Twentieth Century*, 169.1008 (1961), 153-65 (162).

[93] Cohn's essay, which first appeared in 1962, recognised Pinter as "a cousin of the Angry Young Englishmen of his generation, for Pinter's anger, like theirs, is directed vitriolically against the system". Ruby Cohn, 'The World of Harold Pinter', in *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party; The Caretaker; The Homecoming*, pp. 25-9 (p. 25). This essay is discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

[94] Barnes, pp. 182-5 (p. 183).

argues, the play assumes increasingly political proportions, it becomes an exploration of the racism which was prevalent in 1960s Britain. Frequent references are made to the arrival in Britain of new Commonwealth residents, and the racial tensions which were developing in certain quarters of London. Davies, for instance, is vociferous in his condemnation of other races, and his remarks repeat the popular myths which circulated at the time: "Greeks, Poles, and Blacks ... got the manners of pigs"; "them Blacks making noises, coming up through the walls"; "them Blacks coming up from next door, and using the lavatory ... it was all dirty in there".

Within the social structure posited implicitly in *The Caretaker*, Woodroffe identifies a number of political metaphors. The ever-accumulating junk in the room and the seeping of water through a crack in the ceiling "are very apt representations of increasing public concern about the unrestricted entry of "coloured" immigrants into Britain". A smile exchanged by Mick and Aston implies the complicity of Labour (suggested in the figure of Mick) and the Conservatives (suggested in the figure of Aston), tacitly colluding in the exclusion of people from abroad. The broken window which dominates the room, half covered in brown sacking, reflects the division of the country into two hostile groups: the unwanted multitudes of intruders from abroad and the indigenous 'whites'.[95]

The power models identified by Benedict Nightingale are significantly more explicit than those acknowledged by Woodroffe. The first part of Nightingale's 'Harold Pinter/Politics' (1990), discusses the close relationship, during the 1980s, between Pinter's commitment to a diversity of political and human rights issues and the subject matter of his plays.[96] Pinter's involvement with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, Amnesty International, and the Index on Censorship, has found expression in his overtly political works: *One for the Road* (1983) is an indictment of state terrorism and political torture;[97] *Precisely* (1983)

---

[95] Graham Woodroffe, 'Taking Care of the "Coloureds": The Political Metaphor of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker*', in *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (1988), 498-508. Michelene Wandor's essay, 'The State, Communication and Gender' (1987) uses an interpretative model similar to Woodroffe's. According to Wandor, *The Birthday Party* expresses, in non-conscious terms, the social status of females in Britain in the 1950s. Wandor isolates a number of patterns within the play which demonstrate that women were denied all forms of power: the reduction of females to ineffectual stereotypes ("mother and dolly-bird"); the withdrawal of the women from the power struggle between Stanley and the outsiders; Petey's refusal to inform Meg that Stanley has been taken away, thereby preventing her from making "any decisions about the nature of power relationships". Michelene Wandor, *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 29-33 (p. 33).

[96] Benedict Nightingale, 'Harold Pinter/Politics', in *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, ed. by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 129-54 (pp. 129-37).

[97] In interview with Nicholas Hern, Pinter discusses those political opinions which led to the writing of this play. Hern interview, pp. 12-23.

examines the profit-orientated attitude of politicians towards nuclear war;[98] and *Mountain Language* (1988) discusses the manner in which the rights (in this instance, the language) of minor factions is suppressed by tyrannical political regimes.[99]

In the second part of his essay, Nightingale suggests that, far from being departures, the later plays are natural extensions of the earlier works. In the plays of the late 1950s, the political themes which recur in *One for the Road* and *Mountain Language* are worked out in *personal* terms: it is the psychology of politics rather than the overt social effect which is analysed. For Nightingale, the political models in Pinter's early work do not relate to specific incidents, nor are they reducible to criticisms or parodies of particular individuals or events: the political metaphor is embedded in the general sweep of events, in the dynamics between the various characters. In each of the early plays patterns of dominance, control, exploitation, victimisation and subjugation are paramount: the governor of a mental institution incarcerates the inmates and subjects them to humiliating ordeals (*The Hothouse*); an assassin, who has begun to question the motives of those in power, is disorientated and eventually murdered by his superiors (*The Dumb Waiter*); a boarding-house resident is terrorised by two men who torture him and eventually lead him away to be "reorientated" and "integrated" (*The Birthday Party*); the members of a family jostle for dominance over one another, and attempt to reduce one another's defences by means of threat and physical aggression, before acquiescing to the authority of the only woman (*The Homecoming*). These plays are political because they deal with the structures and substructures which exercise control over the individual, and because they analyse *individual* yet *exemplary* power struggles.[100]

Christopher Innes (1992) concurs with Nightingale, and identifies, in the early plays, the inter-personal and psychological microcosm upon which the political macrocosm is based. Innes isolates a number of links between the early

---

[98] See Appleyard interview, 13.

[99] In interview with Anna Ford, Pinter explains that the political relevance of this play is not specific to Turkey. He uses examples from England (Clause 28; the Official Secrets Act; police power) in order to demonstrate that the problems portrayed exist throughout the civilised world. Ford interview, 6. Nightingale's discussion of Pinter's political plays precedes his most recent works, which follow the same pattern. The title of *New World Order* (1991) is taken from one of George Bush's political phrases. The play returns to the territory of *One for the Road*, and depicts the torture of a man, who sits blindfolded and silent, by two urbane and highly verbal interrogators. In *Party Time* (1991), bourgeois couples exchange meaningless chatter and empty compliments at an expensive dinner party. They are apparently indifferent to the bloodshed and turmoil which, it emerges, governs the streets beyond their privileged confines and for which, Pinter implies, they are responsible. The development, in his latest plays, of Pinter's political aesthetic, is examined in Lois Gordon, 'Harold Pinter', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by K.A. Berney, 5th edn (London: St James Press, 1993), pp. 529-34 (pp. 533-4). See also Page, pp. 88-9.

[100] Nightingale, pp. 137-52.

and later plays which are overlooked by Nightingale. He points out that there are, for instance, a large number of figures related to the arts: a concert pianist (*The Birthday Party*), poets (*No Man's Land*), publishers and an author (*Betrayal*). These are the "individual" or the "questioning" voices who are victimised, reflecting the demands for conformity within society, or hinting at the fate of many artists under totalitarian states; and this theme carries through into the practical arena, with Pinter's public efforts to free imprisoned writers through PEN (the political organisation of Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, and Novelists).[101]

John Orr (1990) explores a different area of Pinter's political aesthetic. Orr argues that *The Dumb Waiter* anticipates the plays of Brenton, Barker and Griffiths in being one of the first and most realistic depictions of terrorist activity in the modern British theatre. According to Orr, Pinter's play reproduces with accuracy many of the codes and rituals which dictate the manoeuvring of the terrorist: the patterns of secrecy and evasion; the lack of contact between the assassins and their superiors; the holding back of information until the crucial moments. *The Dumb Waiter* is particularly pertinent as a study of the eradication of the questioning and possibly subversive element in the terrorist organisation: "The self-inflicted wounds of terror which have been notorious from Nechayev until the terror groups of the seventies, the Japanese Red Army, the Baader-Meinhof group and the Weather Underground are shown here with great dramatic power".[102]

Written thirty years ago, Ruby Cohn's 'The World of Harold Pinter' locates political structures in the language of the plays. According to Cohn, the language of Goldberg and McCann operates as a series of commonplaces of social success which express the demands of the System.[103] Cohn's ideas have been developed during the past three years. Innes argues that "Dominance is sought or evaded linguistically".[104] For Innes, the most obvious expression of the struggle for power is the monologue. In *The Birthday Party* Goldberg can terrorise and conquer any of the other characters because he has a monopoly of language. Goldberg's articulateness, expressed, for the most part, in the form of monologues, allows him to talk *over*, and thereby exploit, the other characters

---

[101] Innes, pp. 281-2. The germ of the theories of Nightingale and Innes can be found in a less explicit form in Dukore's book of 1982. See Bernard F. Dukore, *Harold Pinter* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 58-84.
[102] John Orr, 'Terrorism and Social Drama and Dramatic Form', in *Terrorism and Modern Drama*, ed. by John Orr and Dragan Klaic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), pp. 48-63 (p. 57).
[103] Cohn, 'The World of Harold Pinter', p. 25.
[104] Innes, p. 283.

who grope and stumble to find the right words.[105] This argument can be extended to other plays: in *The Caretaker*, for instance, Mick affirms his supremacy over Davies by drowning the tramp's broken sentences in his own expansive monologues. Roote's lengthy speeches at the beginning of *The Hothouse*, during which other characters are intimidated and prevented from speaking, demonstrate his unquestionable authority.[106] In the later plays, the monologue is linked directly to political power. There are scenes in *One for the Road* in which Nicolas, the interrogator, is the only speaker, controlling the lives of his victims and his fellow torturers through his words. In *Mountain Language*, the sergeant counters the young woman's fragmented utterances with monologues, and the guard speaks freely and at length whilst the old woman remains silent, the possibility of speech having been denied her.

Jeanette Malkin's essay (1992) returns to the territory explored by Cohn. Malkin's study of *The Birthday Party* ("a parable of forced social conformity"[107]) focuses on the interrogation of Stanley. The language used by Goldberg and McCann is interpreted as a collage of recognisable jargon styles taken from a variety of verbal stereotypes: the theological sermon, the political rally, the history textbook, the spy movie, the children's rhyme. From this mass of jargon intellectualisms, genre imitations and clichés, there emerges a fragmented and distorted view of the values held by 'Society'. Stanley is, in effect, being bombarded with various manifestations of the mechanical speech which have become the replacement for thought and the hallmark of conformity: he is being attacked by the moral and intellectual platitudes which he, in his seclusion, has rejected. According to Malkin, the aim of the attack is to reimmerse Stanley in those values by realigning him with the *language* of those values.[108]

An admission, made by Pinter in 1988, illustrates conclusively that there is a connection between the language of his plays and historical models:

> I've been writing plays for 30 years and many of them have to do with that mode of operation, of terrorising through words of power, verbal facility. In *The Birthday Party*, I think, it's most evident. I was a boy in the last war, you know, and the sense of the Gestapo was very strong in England.[109]

---

[105] Innes, pp. 283-4.
[106] In other plays, characters fail in their attempts to use language as a power tool, and they become the victims of their own words: the monologues of Rose (*The Room*) and Edward (*A Slight Ache*) fail to be effective, and both characters are knocked from their precarious positions of authority.
[107] Jeanette R. Malkin, *Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 53-74 (p. 53).
[108] Malkin, pp. 59-60.
[109] Ford interview, 5.

Pinter provides in this instance a direct correlation between the linguistic devices of Goldberg and McCann and the rhetoric of torture used by the Nazis. There is a discernible pattern (based on Nazi prototypes) to Stanley's interrogation: the relentless stichomythia serves to disorientate; and the victim is broken by the rapid and increasingly staccato interplay of questions, platitudes and statements:

> GOLDBERG: You need a long convalescence.
> MCCANN: A change of air.
> GOLDBERG: Somewhere over the rainbow.
> MCCANN: Where angels fear to tread.
> GOLDBERG: Exactly.
> MCCANN: You're in a rut.
> GOLDBERG: You look anaemic.
> MCCANN: Rheumatic.
> GOLDBERG: Myopic.[110]

The sinister patter is intercut (as Cohn points out) with the clichés of social success:

> GOLDBERG: You'll be re-orientated.
> MCCANN: You'll be rich.
> GOLDBERG: You'll be adjusted.
> MCCANN: You'll be our pride and joy.[111]

This technique recurs in many of Pinter's plays: it is repeated, for instance, in the victimisation of Lamb (as his name suggests, Lamb is the innocent party, the 'lamb to the slaughter') in *The Hothouse*:

> GIBBS: Fretty?
> CUTTS: Irritable?
> GIBBS: At a loose end?
> CUTTS: Morose?
> GIBBS: Frustrated?
> CUTTS: Morbid?
> GIBBS: Unable to concentrate?
> CUTTS: Unable to sleep?[112]

As Lamb sits, dazed and rendered incoherent by his cross-talking assailants, the wording of the duologue shifts and becomes more politically suggestive:

> GIBBS: Do you ever feel you would like to join a group of people in which group common assumptions are shared and common principles observed?
> LAMB: Well, I am a member of such a group, here, in this establishment.
> GIBBS: Which establishment?

---

[110] *Plays: One*, p. 92.
[111] *Plays: One*, p. 93.
[112] *Plays: One*, p. 235.

LAMB: This one.
GIBBS: Which establishment?
LAMB: This one.
GIBBS: Are you a member of this establishment?[113]

Lamb's interrogation takes place in a context which is overtly political, and relates it directly to the Gestapo: he is tied to a chair and a red light is pointed into his eyes; a pair of earphones emitting high-pitched signals are attached to his head and, at intervals, and for no apparent reason, Gibbs turns up the volume.

In *One for the Road* Pinter employs the same linguistic devices which are evident in the torture of Stanley and of Lamb: the victim is barraged with confusing questions or misleading statements; responses are either blocked off prematurely or met with other questions; strategic words are repeated in succession:[114]

NICOLAS: Room? ... Room?
GILA: The same room.
NICOLAS: As what?
GILA: As I was.
NICOLAS: As I was? ...
GILA: As I was!
NICOLAS: Room? What room?
GILA: A room.
NICOLAS: What room?[115]

Commonplaces pertaining to success or social acceptance punctuate the dialogue. Nicolas insinuates into the interrogation clichés of the 'old boy' school:

NICOLAS: What about a drink? One for the road. What do you say to a drink? ... Drink up. It'll put lead in your pencil.[116]

If we accept that many of Pinter's early plays embody political structures, then it should be possible to redefine the dynamic between characters, and the relationship between a character and his immediate environment, as 'politically' expressive, as opposed to being (as Esslin would have us believe) 'metaphysically' expressive. For Esslin, *The Dumb Waiter* is typical of Pinter's absurdist technique, as it presents, in the image of two men locked in a room, alienated from the 'real', and oppressed by elemental forces beyond, "a poetic image of an

---

113 *Plays: One*, p. 237.
114 Speaking in 1989, Pinter verified the linguistic-political connection between the early and later works: "There are bits of *One for the Road* in *The Birthday Party* itself". Gussow, p. 86.
115 Harold Pinter, *Plays: Four*, rev. edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1993), pp. 387-8.
116 *Plays: Four*, p. 394. The pattern of interrogation which has developed from the Gestapo rhetoric, and through *The Birthday Party*, is evident also in Pinter's recent works. See, for instance, *The New World Order* in *Plays: Four*, pp. 419-20.

undefined fear and expectation".[117] Esslin goes on: "Like Beckett, Pinter wants to communicate the mystery, the problematical nature, of man's situation in the world".[118] Barnes develops Esslin's argument, claiming that *The Dumb Waiter* repeats *Waiting for Godot* in miniature: the two characters, waiting for an unseen third party who never arrives, are caught, like Estragon and Vladimir, in a cycle of futility and unfulfilled expectation; the occasional intrusions by the dumb waiter and the speaking tube communicate a sense of the enigma and the threat which surrounds all men.[119]

In view of what Pinter has stated about this play, the absurdist interpretations of Esslin and Barnes are no longer tenable. Both reviewers emphasise the crushing power of the "mystery" or the "enigma" which envelopes Ben and Gus, and which colours their relationship with one another and with everything external to them. Yet it is made obvious at the end of the play that there is no mystery, no "undefined fear", as each apparently inexplicable interruption is part of a political manoeuvre. Gus alone is sensitive to the series of intrusions: the arrival of the menus; the matches under the door; the whistle from the speaking tube. Whenever he expresses his concern and seeks explanations, Ben remains silent and unconcerned:

> GUS: (*thickly*): Who is it upstairs?
> BEN: (*nervously*) What's one thing got to do with another?
> GUS: Who is it though? ... I asked you a question.[120]

At the point at which Gus asks Ben why he stopped the car in the middle of the night, when Gus was, ostensibly, asleep, the reasons for the intrusions become clear: there is a conspiracy developing, to which Ben is a party, to destroy Gus. The two assassins belong to a hierarchy of authority which Gus continues to jeopardise with his insistent questions ("What time is he getting in touch?"; "I was just wondering ... about the job"; "There's a number of things I want to ask him"), whereas Ben is compliant and obedient ("Scrub round it will you"; "Why do you ask so many questions?"). Only Ben is allowed to receive the menus from the dumb waiter, and to talk to the outside world on the telephone and the speaking tube, because he is receiving instructions for the assassination of his partner. At the end of the play, whilst Gus is in the kitchen, Ben listens intently at the speaking tube, repeating instructions: "Understood. Repeat. He has arrived and will be coming in straight away".[121] When Gus returns, his clothes torn and his

---

[117] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Pelican, 1980), p. 235.
[118] Esslin, 'Godot and His Children', p. 140.
[119] Barnes, p. 182.
[120] *Plays: One*, p. 161.
[121] *Plays: One*, p. 164.

gun missing, Ben levels his gun at him, to complete the execution of a potential subversive.

It is possible to detect a causality in *The Dumb Waiter* which, in that it is politically defined, may suggest a world which is meaningful and rational. Gus is the non-conformist who must be eradicated. The 'mysterious' episodes are all part of the procedure to confuse Gus and to provide a way for Ben to receive instructions. The tension which accumulates between the two characters is not comparable to the tension in Beckett's plays: in the case of Estragon and Vladimir or Hamm and Clov, tension is the product of a desperate fluctuation between the dependence of two fellow sufferers and their tacit realisation that communication is both impossible and futile; the tension between Ben and Gus expresses the inevitable emotional friction which evolves between two men, one of whom is unknowing, innocent and scared, and the other who is anxious and aggressive, attempting to detach himself from the job which he must do.

The careful localisation of the action in *The Dumb Waiter* serves to reduce even further the possibility of "enigma" and "mystery". Ben and Gus are placed, not in a bleak and unknown landscape, but in a recognisable and closely observed Britain: we are informed that the action takes place in Birmingham; that the basement is in a disused restaurant on a quiet back-street which is within walking-distance of the Aston Villa football ground; and references to the newspaper, to television, and to a set of old photographs, locate the play in a contemporary setting (the early 1960s). Localisation can, as the social realists discovered, be a very powerful political tool, as it emphasises the closeness of the audience to the people and places portrayed, and the immediacy and relevance to them of the issues being discussed.[122]

The fact that Pinter's early plays do not take place in a social vacuum demonstrates further his significance as a political writer. For Esslin, the elemental themes of the absurdists develop, in part, out of the universalised and non-specific backgrounds, as there are no localising features which might tie the plays to particular social issues or historical circumstances. Esslin's contention is valid when one considers the isolated mouth in *Not I*, at the core of the metaphysical self, or the abstract automatons of *Jack or The Submission*, denied any of the social or personal attributes which would limit them to a recognisable human milieu.[123] However, when he attempts to extend this rule to embrace

---

[122] Localisation is discussed at length in the first half of this chapter.

[123] The non-local and non-particular nature of Beckett's plays, presupposing an abstract, as opposed to specifically social, subject matter, has been discussed by many reviewers. See A. Alvarez, *Beckett* (London: Fontana, 1973), p. 90; Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 173.

Pinter's work, Esslin's argument weakens.[124] As opposed to being a 'pure' absurdist, a dealer in abstract landscapes, Pinter is, as Stanley Eveling labelled him, "a Dickensian absurdist", in that "his plays are always of the here-and-now, they have a concrete context and are very peculiarly British".[125] In common with Dickens' novels, many of Pinter's early plays take place in definable geographical and socio-economic environments, they involve specific places and time-scales, and include a spectrum of convincing minor characters. In the plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s, Pinter, like Dickens, and like the host of social realist writers of his generation, depicts the intricacies of contemporary life amidst the poverty and squalor of an urban London in the process of transition: this depiction is, in itself, profoundly political.

Nightingale points out that Pinter's early plays leave one "with a strong and somewhat discomfiting sense of the environment beyond the rooms in which they are characteristically set" and that they rely on "constant evocations of an urban underworld ... a seedy and dilapidated London".[126] In the five tiny plays which make up *The Revue Sketches* (1959) Pinter portrays in minute detail the difficulty of living in a London which is growing rapidly.[127] The vagrant old women in *The Black and White* seek warmth in an all-night café, lingering over a bowl of soup. Their conversation brings to life the difficulties of having nowhere to sleep, and the ever-present threat of the police:

> SECOND: You talk to strangers they'll take you in. Mind my word. Coppers'll take you in.
> FIRST: I don't talk to strangers.
> SECOND: They took me away in the wagon once.[128]

The woman in *Request Stop* expresses her anxiety to a man in a bus queue: London is no longer familiar to her; she is threatened by the influx of foreigners:

> WOMAN: I was born just round the corner. Born and bred. These people from the country haven't the faintest idea how to behave. Peruvians.[129]

---

[124] Choudhuri, following Esslin, sees a direct connection between Pinter's 'private' (that is subjective and abstract) settings and his non-social subject matter: "Pinter's world is exclusively private. The great commotions of the world, the seething social problems which engage the attention of the social-realist dramatists do not figure in his vision". Choudhuri, p. 91.

[125] Stanley Eveling, letter to the author, 13 March 1994. See also Eveling's comments in John Spurling, 'Stanley Eveling', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson (London: St James Press, 1973), pp. 234-6 (p. 235).

[126] Nightingale, p. 142.

[127] These short plays, which clearly contradict Esslin's theories, are not mentioned in *The Theatre of the Absurd.*

[128] *Plays: Two*, p. 246.

[129] *Plays: Two*, p. 249. It is typical of Pinter's ambiguous relationship with both absurdism and social realism that, in this instance, the word 'Peruvians' can be interpreted in either of two ways.

The old newspaper seller in *Last to Go* complains that small businesses like his own are becoming obsolete, that old customs are being swept away, and that familiar neighbourhoods are eroding. Aware that he has nowhere to go, he sits, bemused, in a bar, lamenting his predicament to an unconcerned barman.[130] The 'realness' of Pinter's social world is immediately felt, whereas those plays by avowed social realists which set out deliberately to create a slice-of-life of contemporary London, such as Lewis' *Sparrers Can't Sing* and Mankowitz's *A Kid for Two Farthings*, are often sanitised and over-nostalgic, and focus solely on the picturesque oddities and idiosyncrasies of the London of the author's childhood.[131]

The Dickensian mood of the sketches recurs in the full-length plays. *A Night Out* (1959) takes us into the back-streets and the dark corners of the East End, showing, for instance, a young mother who is forced into prostitution in order to provide food for herself and her daughter. Much of *Night School* (1960) takes place in the night-clubs of Soho: a young woman, who fools her landladies into believing that she is a primary school teacher, spends her evenings playing 'hostess' to businessmen. The desperation and hostility endemic to this crowded urban world is explored at length in *The Homecoming* (1965). The problems of day-to-day life amongst the poor, and the sense of a growing criminal under-class, dominate the play: the daily routine of Max's family fluctuates between visits to the gym and to the races, evenings in pubs looking for fights or for women, and merely sitting around the house, hoping for distractions; Joey and Lenny brag of their success with women, two of whom they almost raped on a bombed site near Wormwood Scrubs; Lenny occupies some evenings "looking after" his prostitutes, at least one of whom he has attacked violently; Sam is willing to turn a blind eye when two of his passengers have sex in the back of his car. In order to survive in this social climate, economic considerations are paramount. The characters move in and out of unorthodox and usually illegal business enterprises ("They turned out to be a bunch of criminals like everyone

---

In the first instance, the Peruvians were one of many foreign cultures which entered Britain in the 1950s and, as such, belong to a recognisable social context. On the other hand, Pinter might be using the word in a broader and more abstract sense, to suggest anything which is alien and unknown and, as such, threatening. The word shares both social realist and absurd connotations.

[130] Another of the sketches, *Trouble in the Works*, is based on Pinter's experience of working in one of the many short-lived and low-paying factories which hired financially desperate men for a "temporary two cents". Gussow, pp. 126-7 (p. 127).

[131] Pinter's depiction of a contemporary social world avoids also the episodes of melodrama which beset some of the plays of the social realists. Charles Dyer's *Rattle of a Simple Man* (1963) deals with the same subject as *A Night Out*: the meeting of a naive man and a young prostitute. In Dyer's play the exploration of the relationship between the two central characters, and the concentration on their subsequent self-discoveries, leans towards a Rattiganesque sentimentality which is side-stepped entirely by Pinter.

else") or try to boost their income by gambling (on the horses, on boxing and on football). The decision to take on Ruth ("an extra mouth to feed") as a prostitute comes after a debate about their financial situation ("Well how much is she worth?"), and the reassurance that she will be "a capital investment".[132]

Pinter stresses the immediacy of this world, and, hence, its political relevance, by showing it to be our own world, the world which the audience will encounter outside the theatre. Most of the characters relate stories of their daily travels around the city, and, as such, build up a detailed geographical map of their environment. Sam, a chauffeur, recounts in detail his journeys between destinations:

> Picked him up at the Savoy at half past twelve, took him to the Caprice for his lunch. After lunch I picked him up again, took him down to a house in Eaton Square.[133]

Lenny's night-time adventures around the pubs of central London, ranging between the Ritz Bar and the clubs of North Paddington, are accounted for in similar detail. These intimate descriptions of the London geography refer back to the accounts given in *The Caretaker*: Mick tells of "a bloke I once knew in Shoreditch":

> Actually he lived in Aldgate. I was staying with a cousin in Camden Town. This chap, he used to have a pitch in Finsbury Park, just by the bus depot. When I got to know him I found out he was brought up in Putney ... in the Caledonian Road, just before you get to the Nag's Head.[134]

In common with *The Revue Sketches* and *The Caretaker*, *The Homecoming* communicates a sense of the physicality of London: an intricate web of houses, streets and pubs existing beyond the limited confines of the room on stage.

Pinter's early plays were written in the late 1950s and early 1960s, during the initial flourishing of England's new social theatre. Esslin's attempt to divorce Pinter's work from the wider context of the social drama is both artificial and uninformative: his interpretation of the early plays as wholly abstract and absurd pieces is overtly one-sided, and ignores evidence from the plays themselves and evidence supplied by the author in interviews and speeches. Even though Pinter acknowledges the influence of Beckett in his work, his plays do not comply with Esslin's definition of absurdism. The use of political models and political metaphors in *The Dumb Waiter*, *The Birthday Party* and *The Hothouse*

---

132 Harold Pinter, *Plays: Three* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 93.
133 *Plays: Three*, p. 28.
134 *Plays: Two*, p. 41.

demonstrates that Pinter shared the awareness of social and political realities of his playwriting contemporaries; the accurate rendition of modern urban landscapes in *The Revue Sketches* and *The Homecoming* suggests an affinity with the social realists. Eveling's description of Pinter as a "Dickensian absurdist" is particularly appropriate, as it illustrates the social bias of his aesthetic.[135]

[135] Stanley Eveling, letter to the author, 13 March 1994.

CHAPTER II

ABSURDISM IN A POLITICAL DIRECTION: DAVID CAMPTON

In the plays of David Campton the absurd is deflected into political channels and employed as anti-nuclear and anti-conformist propaganda: "the Theatre of the Absurd is a weapon against complacency (which spreads like a malignant fungus)".[1] Absurd devices are stripped of metaphysical connotations and invested with political significance: the image-based and extra-linguistic techniques popularised by Ionesco are used to create precise and powerful metaphors for a political super-structure in the process of collapse:[2]

> I wanted to express my anger at the political situation - the ignorance of the politicians, wars, injustice, the bomb ... I searched for a new style which would convey my feelings with extreme economy ... I hit upon a style which came to be known as Absurdism.[3]

Critical reaction to the 'social' absurd has been unfavourable and reviewers have tended to dismiss Campton's politicised absurdism as second rate. Hinchliffe argues that the use of the absurd as a vehicle for political commentary reflects a mentality both parochial and limited:

> In looking for British Dramatists of the Absurd we come up against the same problem as when looking for Committed Dramatists: the English temperament. British dramatists tend to put more stress on historical, social or national aspects of a problem rather than exploring a general metaphysical condition ... Unlike Absurd dramatists, Campton has a prominent social conscience. His comedies can be reduced to brief statements like: The Bomb is coming.[4]

For Taylor, the redirection of the absurd towards political issues serves to emasculate the genre. He concludes a brief comparison of Campton's and Pinter's 'absurdism' with the assertion that Pinter is the better writer because his work follows more closely the French model:

---

[1] Quoted in *The Playmakers: One*, compiled by Roger Mansfield (Huddersfield: Schofield and Sims, 1976), p. 98. For Campton the terms "complacency" and "conformism" are synonymous, and they are the inevitable by-products of a corrupt modern society.

[2] Appendix III discusses the *only* absurd play to be translated and adapted by a British playwright. John McGrath's *The Invasion* (1958) complements the plays of Campton as it reinvents Adamov's original and replaces the metaphysical considerations with political ones.

[3] Letter to the author, 4 October 1993.

[4] Arnold Hinchliffe, *British Theatre 1950-70* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974), p. 125.

> Campton distinguishes himself from Pinter ... because his plays do not only betoken a vague unease with things as they are, but show a social conscience worn unequivocally on their author's sleeve ... Thus while in Pinter's comedies of menace the menace is the more pervasive and potent precisely because it is undefined - for Campton the menace is clear enough: it is the Bomb.[5]

Campton is sensitive to those reviews which reject his early works as "simple-minded absurdism, as ban-the-bomb absurdism".[6] He argues that "this does not do them justice - ignoring the developments of ideas and styles within and between the plays".[7] Campton does not attempt to deny his status as a 'ban-the-bomb' absurdist; his concern lies with those reviewers who equate specifically social expressions of the absurd with mediocrity and, in doing so, disregard the finer evolution of forms which illustrate the complexity and significance of political absurdism. This chapter demonstrates that the 'social' absurd of Campton is not merely an irrelevance: though Campton in some sense compromises the integrity of the absurd, his plays take British drama into areas of achievement and innovation which are missed entirely by the social realists and by many of the new writers of the late 1950s.[8]

2.1 "moving into the mind of the insane": *The Lunatic View* (1957)

Critics have failed to acknowledge that Campton's launch into political absurdism began with an exploration of the human condition divested of social referents, with

---

[5] John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 180-8 (p. 184). Reviewers of the 'social' absurd, who focus invariably on Campton, have, on the whole, been more captious than Hinchliffe and Taylor. Hobson, for instance, compares the localised and sociological absurdism of the British with the elemental and metaphysical absurdism of the French, and concludes: "British dramatists had no such formidable philosophy to support them, nothing more, in fact, than an emotional reaction to temporary conditions weighed on the dissolving scales of a local perspective". Harold Hobson, *Theatre in Britain, 1920-1983: A Personal View* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1984), p. 228. According to Elsom, post-war disillusionment in France found dramatic expression in surrealism and absurdism, forms which challenged outmoded concepts of reality and centred on an existential "Search for the Self". In England, discontent was registered exclusively on a social level, crystallising around the theme of "Social Alienation", a theme which, for Elsom, lacks the "high-seriousness [and] ... radicalism" of abstract European models: the social 'absurd' in England typifies this movement. John Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 52-71 (p. 64) and pp. 72-87 (p. 77).

[6] Letter to the author, 5 May 1992.

[7] Letter to the author, 5 May 1992.

[8] David Campton. British. Born in Leicester, 5 June 1924. Educated at Wyggeston Grammar School, 1935-41. Served in the Royal Air Force, 1942-45; and in the Fleet Air Arm, 1945-46. He worked as a clerk for the City of Leicester Education Department, 1941-49, and for the East Midlands Gas Board, 1949-56. He was a recipient of an Arts Council Bursary in 1958 and of the British Theatre Association Whitworth Prize in 1975, 1978 and 1985. See *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by K.A. Berney, 5th edn (London: St. James Press, 1993), pp. 87-8.

an excavation deep into the subconscious mindscape. *The Lunatic View*, though offered as a coherent unit, provides four separate views of madness. The plays reflect a distorted world where communication is breaking down and the individual is losing his sense of self. Each of the short plays is called a "glimpse": each constitutes a brief insight into the mind of an insane person:

> The "Lunatic" of the title is not an individual, he's all of us, Everyman. Modern man is mad and these glimpses into his mind explain why ... The audience must feel it is moving into the mind of the insane, into its own mind, so to speak.[9]

Campton's intention to present the interior world on stage follows the precedent of the French absurd. The internal vista of the first of the "glimpses", *Memento Mori*, is particularly powerful, displaying man at his most elemental and vulnerable.[10]

The stage, which is suspended in semi-darkness, consists of an endless maze of winding corridors, with doors leading to decaying rooms, without windows or obvious exit points. Campton has created a dramatic metaphor of the mind, following the examples of Beckett (*Endgame*), Adamov (*The Invasion*) and Vian (*The Empire Builders*), in which the hollows and corridors reflect the channels and chambers of the brain.[11] Two spectral figures move into this cerebral arena to act out the conflicts and ambiguities of the internal world. They are universalised figures, the Old Man and the Young Man. From the outset, the conversation is shifting and elusive and its twists and turns repeat the geography of the house:

> YOUNG MAN: The drive?
> OLD MAN: Pits and potholes.
> YOUNG MAN: Discourages visitors.
> OLD MAN: A load of gravel works wonders.
> YOUNG MAN: Or a little earth.
> OLD MAN: For charity.
> YOUNG MAN: Eh?
> OLD MAN: A quotation. Unbusinesslike. I apologise.[12]

From the mosaic of evasions and non-sequiturs which constitute the opening duologue, the elements of a sparse plot can be ascertained. The Young Man is seeking to buy a new house, but the Old Man is reluctant to sell. A web of veiled

---

[9] Letter to the author, 16 June 1993.
[10] Michael Anderson is typical of Campton's reviewers: he interprets *all* of his early experimental pieces as exercises in a purely external and political absurdism. Anderson's examination of Campton's absurd plays overlooks *Memento Mori* and concludes (inaccurately) that these works are "lacking in the darker and deeper exploration of the human psyche characteristic of other writers in the school of the absurd". Michael Anderson, 'David Campton', in *A Handbook of Contemporary Drama*, ed. by Michael Anderson and others (London: Pitman, 1972), pp. 81-2.
[11] The play's title is evocative of the inwards focus. The archetypal 'memento mori' is the death's-head: the title suggests an excavation of a mind which is, spiritually and emotionally, dead.
[12] David Campton, *The Lunatic View* (Scarborough: Marshall and Son, 1960), p. 25.

threats and taunts results, as the Young Man strives to intimidate the other into relinquishing his property.

The momentum of the interaction is provided by the implication that both characters have something terrible to hide. The images of violent death, brutality and incarceration colour their conversation. To the Old Man's revealing comment that, "there is a part of my life buried in this house" (p. 24), the Young Man responds:

> I can't see the car from here. I parked it by a sort of burial mound. It can't be seen from the road either, I suppose? There's a bundle in the back that mustn't be touched. Remembrances of my wife ... She ran away with. With a plumber's mate. (p. 26)

From this point on, there is a close integration of action and dialogue. The gradual realisation of hidden passages, hollow floorboards and sliding panels becomes a direct representation of the winding, mental landscapes of the protagonists. Throughout the tortuous conversation buried levels of aggression and of suppressed secrets are slowly unearthed, culminating in the revelation that both have murdered their wives, the Old Man has buried her in the house, and the Young Man needs a place to hide the body:

> OLD MAN: There are no skeletons in the cupboards in this house, sir. Not in the cupboards. (p. 29)

Like the house and the dialogue, the act of murder assumes metaphorical proportions. Man has killed that part of him which is finest and most noble - his capacity for love and compassion - rendering him a shell as empty and decaying as the set.

The play ends in the style of Ionesco's *The Lesson*. The Old Man murders the intruder by sealing him in a hidden chamber:

> OLD MAN: This cupboard has been waiting since I first knew it. Now I know why it was built. It is just your size. Measure it.
> YOUNG MAN: I haven't time.
> OLD MAN: But you have all the time in the world, sir.
> YOUNG MAN: I measured the other.
> OLD MAN: But this is your cupboard, sir. (p. 35)

He disappears into the darkness to greet the next prospective buyer, and, presumably, to perpetuate the cycle of destruction.[13]

---

[13] Styan is the *only* reviewer of Campton's work to recognise in this play the movement into "a subconscious world ... into another dimension of life", one which bears resemblances to the sinister and violent dimensions explored by Kafka. See J.L. Styan, *The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), p. 235.

The second "glimpse", *Getting and Spending*, is transitional. Campton moves away from the universalised fears which haunt the subconscious world in *Memento Mori*, and suggests that man's psychological problems have a specifically social cause. He forges an obvious link between subconscious chaos and an insane social and political environment. Though the internal focus is retained, *Getting and Spending* looks outwards: the results of social conditioning are witnessed from within.

At the beginning of the play two newly-weds, Evelyn and Bobby, still in their wedding-clothes, rush on to the stage. Their speech is a pastiche of exclamations of marital contentment and enthusiasm. The words may not necessarily mean anything, yet the *impression* that they give is of excitement and hope:

> EVELYN: There!
> BOBBY: Here!
> EVELYN: So soft!
> BOBBY: So sharp!
> EVELYN: My wife!
> BOBBY: My husband!
> TOGETHER: Our house![14] (p. 37)

This reference to the house at such an early stage is important. The house, the room in which they stand, is symbolic of them and their togetherness. Evelyn clarifies this point towards the end of the play: "This house is our life" (p. 59).

Initially, the couple believe the house to be, like themselves, pristine, and they indulge themselves in plans for making it bigger and better:

> BOBBY: Oh, there's the nursery.
> EVELYN: And there's the study.
> BOBBY: The nursery and a cot.
> EVELYN: And there's the reception room.
> BOBBY: The nursery and two cots.
> EVELYN: There's the Prime Minister's bedroom. (p. 38)

The descriptions of the plans for the house strike at the theme of the play. Evelyn is trapped in a fantasy of social success. He dreams of social promotion, economic reward and political power. Bobby's expectations, which are to fulfil the duties of the mother and wife and to ensure the social ascendancy of her offspring, are also socially conditioned. Neither character is capable of looking beyond the narrow

---

[14] Linguistic parallels of this technique exist throughout Ionesco's plays. Take, for example, the following exchange from *The Chairs*:

> OLD WOMAN: If only!
> OLD MAN: To ours and to theirs.
> OLD WOMAN: So that.
> OLD MAN: From me to him.
> OLD WOMAN: Him, or her?

Eugene Ionesco, *Three Plays*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1958), p. 136.

range of aspirations which society demands of them, in accordance with their sex.[15] This gulf in aspiration drives the couple apart. They drift to either side of the stage, trapped in pools of light which separate them and prevent further contact, and embellish their myths of social convention:

> *The lights lower, except for a deep pink spot on one side of the stage, and a cold blue on the other. They get up and each acts out his/her particular dream. He is launching himself: she, her daughter.*
>
> EVELYN: "Eliminating your Inferiors." Not the right tie, old man. Not the right regiment.
> BOBBY: Debrett, dear, not the telephone directory. Why should a Count be concerned with a common telephone? (p. 49)

Like the characters in Beckett's later plays and those of Pinter's most absurd works, *Landscape* and *Silence*, Evelyn and Bobby are physically isolated and limited within spotlights, muttering an obsessive monologue which denies communication.

The house and the physical appearance of the characters are the dominant poetic images of the play. During the monologues, temporal events telescope "rather like a piece of stop-motion photography".[16] At various points Evelyn dons the symbols of old age - spectacles, a moustache, braces, white hair - in the same way that Madeleine assumes the accruements of old age in Ionesco's *Victims of Duty*. After his vigorous introduction, he ends the play crouched on all fours, too old and stiff to straighten up:

> BOBBY: Oh, you poor old thing ...
> EVELYN: Old?
> BOBBY: No. Of course not old. That was just a joke. Not old.
> EVELYN: Not old. Why, I carried you over the threshold only an hour ago. Or was it yesterday? Or last year? Not long ago. (p. 61)

The decay of their physical environment is also expressive. Initially, the house is strong and stalwart, representing the health and the positive nature of the couples' love for one-another. As they become locked within their interior lives, restricted by the aspirations which have been programmed into them by society, the house begins to crumble:

> I wouldn't knock off 'cause it cracks the plaster. You've got some nasty cracks in your plaster ... And your paint's peeling off. (p. 38)

---

[15] This theme recurs in later, less overtly experimental, plays.
[16] Taylor, p. 182.

The half-hearted attempts of the couple to rectify this are fruitless: the repairs that are made in their rare moments of escape from self-indulgence are cosmetic. The further they move into their destructive interior world, the more the house collapses. At the end of the play, as the old couple sit, *still* preoccupied with their social fantasies, it becomes obvious that their house has fallen in:

> BOBBY: Is something wrong with the light?
> EVELYN: The Electricity Board gets tired sometimes. I shall have a word or two with them when I am Prime Minister ...
> BOBBY: I had no idea the ceiling was so high.
> EVELYN: It's part of the air-conditioning.
> BOBBY: And there are points of light all over it - just like stars.
> (p. 62)

Decay, to the house and to the body, reflects the disintegration of the mind into madness. The characters are obsessed with the fantasy of social advancement and social success which, being unrealistic and impossible in itself, ultimately destroys them.[17]

In the final plays Campton's focus is wholly external, examining the social pressures responsible for the insanity witnessed in the first two "glimpses".[18] *A Smell of Burning* and *Then...* are parodies of the 'real' world, a world in which war, political injustice and mass conformism are standard. The structure of *A Smell of Burning* makes apparent the connection between man and his environment. A series of circles radiates outwards from the characters, to their immediate environment, and ultimately to the world at large; the circles then collapse inwards again so that the insanity of the world focuses steadily downwards and finds its centre in the characters. The opening episode concentrates on the breakfast routine of a grotesquely caricatured middle-class, middle-aged suburban couple, the Joneses. The interaction of the couple is puerile and directionless. As with the Smiths from Ionesco's *The Bald Prima Donna*, they are obsessed with their breakfast. So limited is the scope of their daily lives that the most meaningless domestic incident becomes a crisis. Mr Jones is outraged because his eggs are over-boiled; the toaster over-does the bread and chaos ensues:

> JONES: We should send this toaster back to the makers.
> MRS JONES: But we need a toaster, dear.
> JONES: It was guaranteed.

---

[17] Campton and Ionesco both show human beings which have been reduced to machines, though the reasons given for the transformation differ radically.

[18] One of the early titles which Campton considered for this quartet of experimental plays was *A View from the Brink*. In some respects *A View from the Brink* is more suitable than *A Lunatic View* as it suggests both an internal and an external focus: the 'brink' alludes to the precarious position of society, pushed to a dangerous extreme, and to the mind which has been forced to the edge of sanity.

> MRS JONES: It toasts.
> JONES: It was guaranteed for twelve months. It should toast on both sides of the bread, strike a warning bell, and eject the toast. Does it? No. Incompetence. The curse of the country. (p. 12)

The conversation is a microcosm of madness, a repetitive exchange of non-sequiturs which reflects their inherent insanity:

> MRS JONES: There was nothing wrong with your eggs this morning.
> JONES: Like lumps of granite.
> MRS JONES: There was nothing wrong with your eggs this morning.
> JONES: Like cannon balls.
> MRS JONES: There was nothing wrong with your eggs this morning.
> JONES: Prove it!
> MRS JONES: You had haddock ... It wasn't very pleasant haddock, though. It had been dead for too long. (p. 7)

The Bald Prima Donna begins, in similar fashion, with comments about food. These also assume a relentless, insane rhythm, reinforced by a stylised repetition:

> MRS. SMITH: Potatoes are very good fried in fat; the salad oil was not rancid ... Mary did the potatoes very well, this evening ... The fish was fresh ... But still, the soup was perhaps a little too salty.[19]

The Joneses are so involved with irrelevant domestic minutiae that they are unmoved by the social disruption taking place beyond their small world.[20] Throughout their interactions, extracts read from the newspapers and heard on the radio, remind the audience of political atrocities which are accumulating in the world: revolutions in Asia; mass murders throughout the Third World and Eastern Europe. The Joneses dismiss the bloodshed entirely:

> JONES: Revolution in Algeria. Didn't amount to anything. Whole thing was squashed in three days. Ringleaders strung up in the market place, and a couple of hundred political prisoners shot. Some women and children still missing.
> MRS JONES: Their blood is hotter than ours.
> JONES: What are we having for lunch?
> MRS JONES: Sausages.
> JONES: Again? (p. 17)

Campton focuses his attack on the complacency of the British, secure in their traditions and protected by their faith in their own supremacy. Mr Jones

---

[19] *Four Plays by Eugene Ionesco*, trans. by Donald Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1958), p. 9.
[20] An interesting thematic parallel exists with Raymond Briggs' social satire, *Where the Wind Blows*.

remarks that the political collapse of other nations is attributable to the fact that they are not British. At the beginning of the play, the British radio fails to mention the political Armageddon and concentrates instead on picturesque nonsense, the stereotype of a rural England which Jones venerates:

> At Hampton Court, a snail has been observed on the thorn. The Meteorological Office forecasts a fine day for the Test Match which opened yesterday. (p. 5)

With the arrival of Mr Robinson, a surveyor from the city council, the political significance of the play intensifies. He informs the Joneses that the "smell of burning" which interrupts their breakfast at intervals is the result of the town hall being set on fire. He refers casually to the riots in the streets and the political executions taking place in the towns of England. Although the madness has now infiltrated the streets of England the Joneses remain unimpressed. In the spirit of true complacency, they dismiss any form of horror because it does not directly affect them.

Robinson, a government 'hit-man', borrows a hatchet and exits to murder an unwanted Alderman. The Joneses are inevitably blind to this and can remark only on the petty details of his appearance and conduct when he has gone:

> JONES: Pleasant young man.
> MRS JONES: Well spoken.
> JONES: Right school. Did you notice his tie?
> MRS JONES: His umbrella.
> JONES: His hat.
> MRS JONES: His gloves.
> JONES: Impeccable.
> MRS JONES: English. (pp. 11-12)

The linguistic formulas would seem to be Ionescan: the accumulation of unnecessary details which obstructs the protagonists from appreciating any of the real horror of their predicament; the deliberate stylisation and repetition of clichés.

The play ends with Robinson, with the greatest cordiality, taking away Mrs Jones, to hang her from the bedroom window. Only at the end does Jones think to ask who Robinson is. His reply is revealing and emphasises the political intention of the play:

> You can hardly tell me apart from several million other Robinsons. I go to work at nine, and finish at five-thirty. I live in a semi-detached villa with a small garden in front. I observe the correct holidays. I am not a deep thinker: it is so much easier to believe almost everything I am told. I believe there is no place like home, and beer is best, and the sun never sets on the British Empire. (p. 21)

Robinson is, in fact, Jones. They are ciphers of the millions of conservative, apathetic civilians who occupy the British isles. It is owing to the political and emotional ignorance and xenophobia which they represent that the world has turned mad and that atrocities will always continue.

The most powerful and direct image chosen by Campton to reflect political insanity can be found in the final "glimpse". In *Then...* England has been reduced to debris because of "a nuclear misunderstanding". The only two survivors owe their lives to an unthinking conformism. According to official governmental decree, the only way of surviving radiation is to put a bag over one's head. Phythick, a scientist, and the Girl, a former Miss Europe, are stranded amongst the rubble, their heads hidden beneath paper bags. Their language reflects that of the Joneses; she is literal and simplistic, he reiterates clichés:

> PHYTHICK: You remind me of old, forgotten, far-off things. "Behold thou art fair, my love. Behold thou art fair."
> GIRL: I'm a brunette. (p. 74)

The dominating image of this play is, on the surface, Beckettian: two lonely individuals in a broken landscape, filling the void of their lives with jargon. However, Campton is emphatic that the situation is purely political:

> THEN... is a very simple play, and its power lies in its simplicity. Its message is at the heart of THE LUNATIC VIEW. Political mismanagement has destroyed the world. It has destroyed man also. Man and society mirror one another, and the mirror has been cracked.[21]

None of the characters of *The Lunatic View* is sane. Phythick and the Girl may have survived, but their conformism and their clichéd dialogue demonstrate that they have internalised social dogma and are little more than machines. The devastated mental landscapes of the characters act as mirrors to an external, social world

---

[21] Letter to the author, 13 May 1993. The derivativeness of Campton's technique in these early plays is conscious and deliberate. In common with most of the English absurdists who are discussed in this thesis, Campton did not have a formal or prolonged education. He left school at the age of fifteen in order to work for his local council, and he occupied his leisure hours by joining a local amateur dramatics club. As such, Campton's exposure to the theatre was extremely limited and he was, owing to a lack of experience and knowledge, forced to seek inspiration in those plays in which he acted. He absorbed ideas readily from those few plays at his disposal, and, indeed, many of the images which he uses in his early plays can be traced to other sources. It was only after a few years of part-time acting and writing that Campton felt that he had "educated" himself in the theatre and, as a result, he began to acquire a dramatic voice which was less reliant on others. The derivativeness of *Then...*, for instance, represents a necessary stage of Campton's nurturing in the theatre; a process which the writer undertook deliberately to compensate for his lack of education and in order that he might use the techniques of others as a springboard for his future development.

ruined and rendered irrational by war, by the nuclear threat, by xenophobia and conformism.

2.2 "defined by the society which contains them": *Four Minute Warning* (1960)

Three years after the production of *The Lunatic View*, Campton wrote a second quartet of experimental plays. The title, *Four Minute Warning*, evokes the external and political bias of these works, and Campton's movement away from the sub-conscious world. The collection overlaps, stylistically and thematically, with *Then...* and *A Smell of Burning*. With the exception of one of the plays, which is a study of war in general, each presents a satirical survey of the nuclear and post-nuclear age:[22] in *Mutatis Mutandis* a husband struggles to admit to his wife that their newly-born child has been transformed into a mutant as a result of radiation poisoning; *Little Brother: Little Sister* examines life in a nuclear fall-out shelter, as two children attempt to overcome the tyranny of an old cook and escape into the contaminated world outside; the break-down of a stylised ritual of negotiation between two caricatured diplomats in *Out of the Flying Pan* results in nuclear devastation; *Soldier from the Wars Returning* repeats the idea of mutation, as a soldier relates a tale of his courage in battle he acquires the symbols of the havoc and destruction which he has caused.

---

[22] In the same year as *Four Minute Warning*, Joan Littlewood commissioned an American dramatist, William Saroyan, to write a play for 'Theatre Workshop'. The result, *Sam the Highest Jumper of Them All* (1960), was the first and only absurd play to be produced at Stratford East in the 1960s. Saroyan's play, written to accord with the ethos of 'Theatre Workshop', uses, like Campton's, absurdist techniques for the purposes of commentary on nuclear war. In his 'Introduction', Saroyan writes: "Fifteen years ago the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs gave the dramatists of the world clear instructions" (p. 13). For his exploration of the post-Hiroshima world, Saroyan chooses not to follow the Osborne route by "raging against fate, or something just as bad", but to examine the situation through presentational and metaphoric means: "the form of kindergarten drama" (p. 14). In *Sam*, then, the situation is worked out in forms of illusive childishness and naivety, using stereotyped characters and slap-stick situations which are heavily reminiscent of Jarry and Ionesco. The play presents a grotesque world where mankind has, as a result of its deification of "the bomb", been reduced to marionettes. Sam, a menial bank clerk, is disgusted by the mechanisation of humanity and is determined to stamp his personality onto the world by achieving the one thing which no man has done before: to jump seven feet. Though the nuclear issue is alluded to incidentally, Saroyan keeps the subject fresh in his audience's mind. A narrator-figure, Wally Wailer, appears on stage at regular intervals, to remind the audience that the two-dimensional characters which they see before them are the inevitable products of the nuclear age. A chorus of voices at the end of each scene suggests a variety of reasons why men have become automatons: "the radioactive fall-out from H-bomb tests is destroying the human race at its source, in the genes" (p. 52). See William Saroyan, 'Introduction', in *Sam the Highest Jumper of Them All* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp. 11-14. See also Coren's discussion of the play and its relationship to 'Theatre Workshop', in Michael Coren, *Theatre Royal: 100 Years of Stratford East* (London: Quartet Books, 1984), pp. 40-1.

It is possible to identify in these plays a wide array of dramatic techniques associated with the absurd, and with Ionesco in particular.[23] The flexibility of all four pieces reflects the rhythms of an internal reality which disregards the causal, temporal and spatial rules of conventional theatre. In *Soldier from the Wars Returning* and *Out of the Flying Pan*, for instance, sequential time yields to circular time and the accelerated time-scale allows for the compression of years of negotiation or war into a series of rapid verbal exchanges. The rejection of 'character' and the resort to absurd stereotyping is evident in the figures of the despotic cook, wielding a disproportionately large meat cleaver, the soldier with his athletic physique, exaggerated uniform and row of medals, and the grey, interchangeable diplomats. Yet it is in his mastery of the central poetic image that Campton remains consistently absurd. There is no direct narrative in any of these plays. Each acquires its mood and momentum from the changes in the focal image: in *Mutatis Mutandis*, the purple sunset rises slowly in the green sky, alighting finally on the three-eyed, multi-limbed baby; in *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, the soldier's barrel chest sinks, his strong arms wither, and he is gradually wrapped in blood-stained bandages. A closer study of the techniques used in *Out of the Flying Pan* and *Soldier from the Wars Returning* illustrates the extent of Campton's continued stylistic similarity to Ionesco.

Soldier from the Wars Returning repeats a technique, the juxtaposition of temporal acceleration and physical mutation, that is first used in *Getting and Spending*. This device is employed by Ionesco in a number of plays: in *Victims of Duty*, Choubert transforms from robust young man to nonagenarian within seconds, and his immediate environment changes from house to swamp. The context of the change is Choubert's enforced journey into his subconscious and corporeal mutation reflects exposure to the withering reality of the internal world: Choubert is metaphorically sucked of life as he encounters the meaninglessness of experience. Campton's focus shifts from the metaphysical and rests on the political: in *Soldier from the Wars Returning*, the image of corporeal mutation expresses the realities of

---

[23] Graham-White discovers a lot of superficial parallels between the plays of Ionesco and Campton. He compares, for instance, *Mutatis Mutandis* to Ionesco's *Jack or The Submission*: the revelation that Jack's wife has three noses and six eyes matches the wife's realisation that her newborn child has green hair, purple eyes and a tail. The offstage accumulation of cots and prams in *Getting and Spending* reflects the proliferation of physical objects in many of Ionesco's plays. See Anthony Graham-White, 'David Campton', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 78-81 (p. 81). According to Marland the main stylistic similarity between Ionesco and Campton is the visual or verbal metaphor which is used to epitomise the 'idea' or mood of a play. For instance, *Soldier from the Wars Returning* and *Amédée* both adopt the image of corporeal transformation to communicate the author's intention. See Michael Marland, 'Introduction', in *Laughter and Fear: Nine One-Act Plays by David Campton* (London: Blackie, 1969), pp. vii-x (pp. vii-viii).

war and the dehumanisation of the individual as he submits to the dictates of a perverse authoritarianism.

At the end of "a war" a picture-postcard Barmaid, complete with "bouncing bosom" and "smackable bottom", encounters one of the victorious soldiers:

> *He has a healthy tan, and a magnificent physique, both of which are emphasised by his uniform. He wears a row of medals.*[24]

In keeping with his appearance, his monologue is a pastiche of military clichés, tales of his military prowess, details of the men he has slaughtered and the homesteads he has sacked. The Soldier has accepted orders blindly:

> Came through it all without a scratch. I stuck to Queen's Regulations. Read the notices. Led a healthy life. I cleaned my teeth night and morning, and breathed through my nose. (p. 55)

The Barmaid's behaviour matches closely the words spoken by the Soldier as she dresses him in bandages that correspond to the wounds which he has inflicted upon others. At the conclusion of his monologue he wears an eye-patch, a head-band, a sling, and a crutch: the symbols of the damage which he has brought about. The image of the wounded soldier reflects not only the destructiveness of war, but the moral decrepitude of the conformist.

In *Out of the Flying Pan* Campton's 'absurdism' is expressed in both language and structure, and is based on the same methods of linguistic experimentation which fuelled the absurdists' break from realism. The play examines the meeting of two diplomats from unspecified nations and traces the unending chain of discussion, agreement, argument and discordance which constitute the meaningless cycle of political negotiation. In appearance and behaviour, the two men are interchangeable:

> *Lights up on a solitary man with a despatch case ... An identically dressed man with despatch case hurries on.*[25]

The ensuing negotiations take on the pace and stylised behaviour of a ritual. Both men communicate, throughout, with posed, empty gestures:

> *The two men assume exaggerated postures of greeting. Two different photographs are taken - the first photograph is a handshake, the second photograph is some sign - a clenched fist, 'V' sign, handshake over head, etc.* (p. 47)

---

[24] *Miller's Medley*, No. 3 (London: J. Garnet Miller, 1963), p. 43.
[25] David Campton, *Little Brother: Little Sister and Out of the Flying Pan* (London: Methuen, 1966), p. 49.

The dialogue mirrors the compressed, economical nature of the gestures. It is a parodic version of the strictly formal exchanges between diplomats:

> A: How?
> B: Nice.
> A: Pleasant?
> B: Comfortable.
> A: Jolly.
> B: Time?
> A: Exactly. (p. 47)

The sequence of staccato, rapidly barked-out words evolves into a series of nonsense monologues. The ensuing combination of verbal pun, word association and direct linguistic meaninglessness is intended to create the impression of the ritual of negotiation. Yet the implication is that negotiation is itself meaningless:

> B: This is hysterical evasion. I come daring the olive. Branch. Our signatures on the Charter will ensure that between our hate stations will be established a bite of peas, to be enjoyed by our childrens and our childrens ... (p. 48)

The usual diplomatic clichés are suggested: "olive branch", "our children's children" yet they are couched in a confusing outpouring of gibberish. At times, communication depends solely on word association:

> A: The Charter.
> B: The Barter.
> A: The Carter.
> B: The Garter.
> A: Legato.
> B: Regatta. (p. 51)

Linguistic parallels with Ionesco are plentiful. Towards the end of *The Bald Prima Donna* language takes on an irrational momentum, dictated entirely by the association of like-sounding words:

> MR SMITH: Seducer seduced!
> MRS MARTIN: Scaramouche!
> MRS SMITH: Sainte-Nitouche!
> MR MARTIN: Go take a douche![26]

At other times, language deteriorates into a series of rapidly reiterated sounds and single letters:

> A: Memo three.
> B: Division two.

---

[26] *Four Plays by Eugene Ionesco*, p. 40.

A: Revision V.
B: B.
A: C.
B: D.
A: E. (p. 50)

In Ionesco's play, once language has exhausted itself, it collapses into a series of fragmented alliterations and, finally, lists of single letters:

MRS MARTIN: Bazaar, Balzac, bazooka!
MR MARTIN: Bizarre, beaux-arts, brassieres!
MR SMITH: A, e, i, o, u ...
MRS MARTIN: B, c, d, f ...[27]

At intervals during this meaningless linguistic cycle of negotiations a tone of disagreement, succeeded by one of violence, is introduced as the negotiations break down:

A: Our.
B: Our.
A: We.
B: To me from you.
A: From you to me.
B: Trick!
A: Trap!
B: Blind.
A: Bait. (p. 59)

As a result of recurrent diplomatic tension, there comes "*the roar of a cosmic sized explosion*". With the world obliterated through bureaucratic stupidity and political mismanagement, the two diplomats recommence their negotiation: the final words of the play are a re-enactment of the greetings of the introduction. Events have come full circle and nothing has been achieved, or will be achieved, apart from mass destruction. As in *Memento Mori*, the cycle of violence continues.

In revised productions of *Four Minute Warning*, Campton replaced *Out of the Flying Pan* with a new play, *At Sea*, a stark allegory on the state of Britain.[28] A Young Man is horrified to discover that the luxury cruiser he is on is sinking. His attempts to communicate their predicament to the other characters (a stereotyped *grande dame*, a retired colonel and a mercenary steward) are fruitless, as they choose to ignore the problems, and remain, like the Joneses, safe in their unthinking way of life:

---

[27] *Four Plays by Eugene Ionesco*, p. 41.
[28] This play provides a more suitable conclusion to the quartet because it demonstrates that the situations presented apply not only to war but to society in general.

> Who would want to leave the ship anyway? We are too comfortable to take to the boats. Who would look after us in the boats? Who would be there to turn down our sheets and serve our nightcaps?[29]

At the end of the play, the allegory crystallises in a single powerful metaphor. The Young Man, driven to desperation by the accelerated discovery of rotting wood and fresh holes, approaches the stalwart figure of the Captain who has remained unmoving, watching all, from the shadows at the back of the stage. To his horror, the Young Man realises that the Captain is a painted dummy, which he knocks over with a slight shove. The Steward is typically unconcerned:

> The old ship's been carrying on, doing the same things in the same way, for so long, there's no need for him at all. (p. 20)

The revelation that the ship has no leader, no guiding force, impels the Young Man to leap to his death in the water. To the strains of 'Rule Britannia', the ship continues to sink steadily, with the rest of the characters going mindlessly about their business.

At Sea is, in some respects, the quintessential expression of Campton's 'absurdism': the allegorical framework, the reliance on visually engaging poetic images, the presentational mode, and the disregard of accepted conventions of characterisation and structure, appear to owe a great deal to the absurd; indeed, the central allegorical predicament closely parallel Berenger's in *Rhinoceros*. However, Campton adapts the metaphoric mode to political themes. The unquestioning and conformist attitude which he regards as fundamental to British apathy and corruption is parodied in the archetypal figures of the imperialist colonel and the opinionated matriarch; the muted movements of 'Rule Britannia' in the background remind the audience of the 'Englishness' of the characters and of their predicament. The ship itself, the central image, is depicted unequivocally as Britain, scuppered by mismanagement and injustice: indeed, a ship without a Captain is a direct emblematic equivalent of a country without a leader: "It was written during the Macmillan administration when I was not the only one wondering if there was anyone up there at all".[30]

---

[29] David Campton, *At Sea*, unpublished, p. 17.

[30] Letter to the author, 5 June 1994. It is noticeable that the metaphor of the ship without a captain, which might easily refer to humanity without a God, is interpreted by Campton in strictly political terms: the image reflects a nation without a leader.

2.3 "chaos is a political construct": The roots of Campton's 'absurdism'

Campton is conscious of stylistic similarities between his own plays and those of the absurd, but he insists that Ionesco did not influence *The Lunatic View* or *Four Minute Warning*. He admits that he was not exposed to Ionesco until the early 1960s, after he had completed the second collection:

> In spite of the resemblances between some of my plays and those of M. Ionesco, he was not an influence. I had written the LUNATIC VIEW and most of FOUR MINUTE WARNING before I encountered any of his material.[31]

He argues that "if critics look beyond the surface of our plays they will see that we hold fundamentally different views of life".[32] For Campton, French absurdism shakes "the roots of one's existence"[33] by portraying "humanity in its naked state, humanity in a vacuum".[34] His own works, on the other hand, demonstrate that man has a context (society) and that the alteration of this context may lead to his salvation:

> The characters in my plays do not exist in a vacuum ... far from it. They are defined by the society which contains them, they are social creatures. There are deficiencies in society which demand to be addressed. Man will be sane again when his society is sane.[35]

Absurdism embraces the human condition in its entirety, and is informed by a universalised vision of existential chaos;[36] in Campton's plays, chaos is localised and interpreted as a sociological phenomenon. "The chaos affecting everyone today [is] political, technical, sociological, religious":[37]

> Chaos is a political construct. If we look into the mind of the lunatic we see social structures. He has internalised the structures of his society.[38]

---

[31] Letter to the author, 20 July 1990. Taylor remarks that the similarities between Campton and the absurd are especially striking in the light of the fact that Campton knew of neither Ionesco nor Pinter before he began writing. See Taylor, p. 183.
[32] Letter to the author, 12 December 1991.
[33] *The Playmakers: One*, p. 98.
[34] Letter to the author, 12 December 1991.
[35] Letter to the author, 16 June 1993.
[36] *The Playmakers: One*, p. 98.
[37] Quoted in Benedict Nightingale, 'David Campton', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson, 2nd edn (London: St James Press, 1977), pp. 131-5, (p. 134).
[38] Letter to the author, 12 December 1991.

Campton's views - that the source of the chaos is identifiable and alterable - presuppose a belief in action and in change and a sense of optimism which are anathema to the true absurdist:

> When I saw Ionesco I realised that, even though we may have been running on the same lines, we had different destinations. Ionesco's plays move towards disorder and despair. Mine try to build.[39]
>
> I think, put simply, that Absurdism is basically pessimistic whereas I cannot keep optimism out. "There is hope yet" at the end of LITTLE BROTHER, LITTLE SISTER was not intended cynically.[40]

At the end of *Little Brother: Little Sister*, the Cook, a symbol of political tyranny, is overthrown and the young couple enter the liberty of a new world; in *A Smell of Burning* the Joneses are destroyed by the mad civilisation which they helped to create. The madness witnessed in *Memento Mori* and *Getting and Spending* is not irreversible: "changes in external circumstances will bring stability to the inner circumstances".[41] This faith in change is supplemented by a vision of humanity as compassionate and altruistic: *Then...* concludes with the two characters taking off their paper bags as a sign of trust to one another; at the end of *Mutatis Mutandis* the mother hears her deformed baby crying and decides that she cannot reject it; the love shared by the young couple in *Little Brother: Little Sister* provides them with the strength to rebel.

The optimistic element in Campton's plays unites the 'absurd' plays of 1957 and 1960 with his works of the first half of the 1950s.[42] Early pieces like *Going Home* (1950), *Change Partners* (1951) and *Sunshine on the Righteous* (1953) belong firmly in the ranks of Rattiganesque old style realism, demonstrating that human capacity for goodness and hope enables the individual to overcome his immediate emotional and moral difficulties. Campton comments that:

> There is for me an obvious sense of continuity in my plays. Before 1957 I was a committed writer. I was committed to a faith in mankind to restore itself and for individuals to rebuild themselves through the power of their compassion and dignity. After 1957 this belief remained. At the bottom of many of my plays after 1957 you

---

[39] Letter to the author, 5 May 1992. Campton's own assessment of his plays is that they "are not naturalistic but they do not express that chaos which is essential to the Absurd. They may be absurd plays but they have a positive outlook". *The Playmakers: One*, p. 98.

[40] Letter to the author, 12 August 1989.

[41] Letter to the author, 16 June 1993.

[42] Campton's optimism is often dismissed as unrealistic and sentimental. Nightingale, for instance, regards the ending of *Little Brother: Little Sister* as "wrongheadedly optimistic" in that his vision implies little more than the emergence of a more innocent world after the nuclear holocaust. This, as well as being an unconvincing argument, is "undermining his opposition to the H-bomb". Nightingale, p. 135.

> will find that this commitment to mankind's strength is intact. Yet now it has a social structure built on to it. I am committed to airing social issues. Whatever manner of social problems face mankind he will transcend them ... through his dignity and his humanity. You see, after 1957 I am doubly committed, both to man and society. I could not be committed to social change if I were not committed to a belief in man's abilities.[43]

Campton explains that the style of his experimental works, which is not attributable to the influence of Ionesco, can be traced to a source common to most of the absurdists. As his interest in political issues began to develop in the 1950s, he searched for a dramatic framework to communicate his convictions:

> I was deeply affected by the political events of the 1940s and 1950s, they made me realise that I was a political being and that I was responsible for my situation - the war, the Suez crisis, the campaign for nuclear disarmament ... The old order seemed to be breaking up at every level; nothing could be taken for granted. The old literary order, too, was deteriorating. Priestley was replaced by Osborne ... [yet] I was not convinced by Osborne's social passion - the replacement of an outmoded realism by a new one did not seem satisfactory.[44]

Campton turned away from old style realism and recent developments in the new realism towards "popular cultural influences such as circuit comedians and music-hall comedy - one-man shows were big news on the TV".[45] He admits a particular fascination for stand-up comedy:

> I can say exactly how my first plays in that genre came to be written. As a working writer I had been commissioned to provide comedy scripts for BBC programmes - they were little more than a mass of jokes strung together. Audiences laughed, but I worried because they were laughing at nothing. According to the Book of Ecclesiastes "As the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool". So I tried to harness those comedy techniques to serious subjects - to tickle audiences into paying attention while slipping in the message ... when putting A SMELL OF BURNING together I actually wrote half the jokes first.[46]

In common with Beckett, Ionesco and Pinter, Campton borrowed liberally from the music-hall and vaudeville traditions.[47] Unlike the true absurdists, however, he redefined the music-hall techniques to make them politically expressive.

---

[43] Letter to the author, 16 April 1993. There are only two reviews which discuss Campton's transition from old style realism to absurdism (these are also the single most comprehensive studies of his plays): Taylor, pp. 180-8; Nightingale pp. 131-5.

[44] Letter to the author, 20 July 1990.

[45] Letter to the author, 20 July 1990.

[46] Letter to the author, 20 July 1990.

[47] Irving Wardle was the first critic to examine the extent of the verbal similarities between the works of Pinter and Campton. Irving Wardle, 'Comedy of Menace', *The Encore Reader: A*

Campton's next 'absurd' play, written after exposure to, and in imitation of, Beckett and Ionesco, continues to ignore the metaphysical principles of absurdism. *Comeback* (1963) adapts Beckettian and Ionescan devices with self-conscious skill and uses them, untypically of Campton, for the "humble purposes of good old-fashioned entertainment".[48]

2.4 A situation comedy of the absurd: *Comeback* (1963)

The dramatic direction taken by Campton after his first encounter with Ionesco's works is a revealing comment on his 'absurdism'. By his own reckoning, Campton was first exposed to Ionesco in 1960. He claims that he recognised an affinity immediately:

> When Ionesco turned up, I leapt on it with whoops of delight, and said "Yes, this is the sort of thing I've been waiting for".[49]

In spite of his professed enthusiasm, none of his major plays produced during the next three years demonstrates Ionesco's influence. Indeed, none of these works manages to reproduce the experimental fervour of 1957 or 1960: *Passport to Florence* (1961), focusing on domestic difficulties within a middle-class household, represents a return to old style realism; *Usher* (1962) is a melodramatic rendition of Poe's short story; and *Cock and Bull Story* (1963) is, in the style of Waterhouse and Hall, a piece of comic realism about feuding neighbours. The first play to show any genuine Ionescan influence is *Comeback* (1963). Campton admits that:

> At the time I was becoming interested in the territory claimed by Ayckbourn ... the modern comedy of manners centring on the family ... a bit conventional, and I wondered how it would mix with the Absurd.[50]

Chronicle of the New Drama, ed. by Charles Marowitz and others (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 86-91, (p. 87).

[48] Letter to the author, 16 April 1993. In this letter, Campton admits that after *Four Minute Warning* he turned, for the most part, to "less adventurous things" and that he "lost the appetite for changing the world and wrote a few 'easy' plays - family entertainment stuff".

[49] Michael Bath, 'Interview with David Campton', in *New Theatre Magazine*, 10.3 (1970), 16-20 (19).

[50] Letter to the author, 16 April 1993. Most of the plays which Campton wrote at this time reflect his interest in the modern comedy of manners: *Cock and Bull Story*, *Resting Place* (1964), *A Point of View* (1964) and *Where Have All the Ghosts Gone?* (1965) are all based loosely on the situation comedy format.

Campton takes a situation typical of Ayckbourn - mistaken identity within the family - and replaces the comic realism with Ionescan surrealism.

Comeback illustrates two aspects of Campton's dramatic technique which are fundamental to his relationship with the absurd. In the first instance, the play demonstrates the extent of Campton's craftsmanship, his ability to apply, with great flexibility and ingenuity, a range of absurd devices to different dramatic genres. Furthermore, *Comeback* shows that Campton's application of Ionescan mechanisms was not a matter of belief in the precepts of the absurd, but a reflection of his desire to employ those devices with which he might, at any given moment, communicate his intentions fluently and clearly and thereby create an impression which has the maximum impact:

> In LUNATIC VIEW and FOUR MINUTE WARNING I dipped liberally into the reservoir of the Absurd without knowing it ... it [the absurd] served its purpose well ... communicating my political outrage with all the vehemence of a blow to the face, I don't think this would have been possible had I relied on established means ... The Absurdism of COMEBACK is conscious and deliberate ... this time I wanted to use the Absurd for modest purposes ... to entertain, to raise laughter ... it might help if you envisage the play as a clothes-horse on which to hang Ionesco, Beckett ... Pinter perhaps.[51]

Campton's suggestion, that we visualise *Comeback* as a skeleton fleshed out with various absurd borrowings, is helpful, and allows sense to be derived from a play which is self-consciously cryptic and eclectic. The 'situation' or 'plot' itself is typical of an Ayckbourn comedy. Vera Permanence and her daughter, Pamela, are middle-class eccentrics: vain, excitable, occupying their time with standard mother-daughter quarrels. When a strange man, Harry, enters their home, claiming to be the father who had abandoned them fifteen years previously, they set out to trap him into revealing his true identity. The plot is indeed undeveloped and the identity-games occupy the entirety of both acts. The real interest and originality lie in the swiftness and skill with which Campton allows the play to glide from one absurd reference to another, be this in the form of direct stylistic emulation of an absurd play, indirect allusion, or simple parody.

Verbal echoes of absurd plays abound. As Harry stands rigid in his lounge, demanding recognition, stalwart in his belief that something *will* and *must* happen if he persists, his situation comes to resemble that of Estragon and Vladimir. Campton is aware of the similarity in predicament and alludes to it ironically:

> VERA: What are you doing here?

---

[51] Letter to the author, 4 October 1993.

HARRY: Waiting.
VERA: For what?
HARRY: I don't know. To see how it all turns out. The conclusion. The end.[52]

Immediately after this confession, a slight alteration of the verbal mode allows for a reference to *Endgame*:

HARRY: What are you doing here?
VERA: Waiting.
HARRY: For what?
VERA: For you to make a false move. (p. 48)

The relationship between Harry and Vera comes to resemble a game of chess, a strategic shifting between waiting and attack. The chess-metaphor is complemented by another image of game-play, that of tennis: Vera's teasing instruction to Harry, "You serve" (p. 50), reflects Estragon's "You to serve".

Campton's admission that he "was at this time starting to read and enjoy Beckett"[53] suggests that the verbal resonances of *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* are not mere coincidence. Some examples are so overt that comparison is unavoidable. Vera's boyfriend, Hilary, spars with Harry in a quick-fire round of insults, which deteriorates into simple word-association:

HILARY: Squealer.
HARRY: Tiddler.
HILARY: Tout.
HARRY: Layabout.
HILARY: Communist.
HARRY: Pubcrawler.
HILARY: Potwasher.
HARRY: Water cart.
HILARY: Wind instrument.
HARRY: Daisy chain.
HILARY: Commode! (p. 32)

This episode repeats a similar interaction in *Waiting for Godot*:

VLADIMIR: Moron!
ESTRAGON: Vermin!
VLADIMIR: Abortion!
ESTRAGON: Morpion!
VLADIMIR: Sewer-rat!
ESTRAGON: Curate!
VLADIMIR: Cretin!
ESTRAGON: [*With finality*] Crritic![54]

---

[52] David Campton, *Comeback*, unpublished, p. 48.
[53] Letter to the author, 4 October 1993.
[54] *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1986), p. 69.

It is, however, to Ionesco, and particularly to the Ionesco of *The Bald Prima Donna*, that the verbal fabric of the play owes much of its substance. Campton claims that:

> I wanted to keep the sit-com format, and experiment with a language that was Ionescan.[55]

From the opening dialogue, language is established as something capricious, a tool with which to confuse and make nonsense out of sense:

> VERA: Were you here before?
> HARRY: Before?
> VERA: When I asked.
> HARRY: Yes.
> VERA: You said no.
> HARRY: Yes.
> VERA: I didn't believe you. Do you play these games often?
> HARRY: No.
> VERA: Are you the man who's coming to look at the Ascot? (p. 2)

The pace of the verbal games accelerates throughout the first act. In a speech reminiscent of *The Bald Prima Donna*, Harry attempts to persuade Pamela, in the same manner that Mr Martin strives to explain to Mrs Martin, that they are married:

> PAMELA: Have we been introduced?
> HARRY: We've been married.
> PAMELA: Are you sure?
> HARRY: I'm Harry. You're Pamela ... You *are* Pamela, aren't you?
> PAMELA: I'm Mrs Permanence.
> HARRY: I'm Harry Permanence.
> PAMELA: How do you do?
> HARRY: Your husband.
> PAMELA: You're thinking of someone else. (p. 6)

As Harry's desperation increases and the suspicions of Vera and Pamela continue, the language begins to falter beneath the pressure, acquiring its own delirious momentum. Pamela's confused attempt to eject the intruder evolves into a barrage of clichés:

> It's been very pleasant meeting you. We've had such a jolly chat. I'm sorry you have to go now. How time flies when one is enjoying oneself. Perhaps you can come again when you're not so pressed. It's been absolutely lovely having you. Do call again. (p. 13)

Language is in a state of constant decomposition: cliché deteriorates into non-sequitur:

---

[55] Letter to the author, 16 April 1993.

> VERA: She was alive as a spring morning. He never noticed.
> (*Pause*)
> HARRY: How far can you fall when the bottom drops out of the world?
> (*Pause*)
> PAMELA: If there's no cake, you take the bread and butter, and say thank you. (p.16)

At other times, the non-sequiturs take on a rhythm of their own, and result in outlandish verbal digressions:

> HARRY: Do either of you have a booby-hatcher's clobber-trap. I know a first rate wheeze with a booby-hatcher's clobber-trap, and a tame tiger ... Are there a couple of vermicated formbysquills in the house? No? A whipper-handled formbysquill would do as well but you don't get the sparks.
> PAMELA: My Harry could stand on his head. (p. 17)[56]

Another technique common to Ionesco and Beckett is that of complete breakdown in language: characters reduced to iterating, mindlessly, phrases, words or sounds. Harry and Pamela find themselves locked in a stale-mate and attempt to escape it by resorting to gibberish:

> PAMELA: You're constipated.
> HARRY: Uh-hu.
> Pamela: It's all those cornflakes. Too many cornflakes, and not enough exercise: that's your trouble.
> HARRY: Uh-hu.
> PAMELA: Or have you run out of words?
> HARRY: Uh-hu.
> PAMELA: Defence is the lowest form of attack.
> HARRY: Uh-hu.
> PAMELA: Sit back and say nothing.
> HARRY: Uh-hu.
> PAMELA: While she nags.
> HARRY: Uh-hu.
> PAMELA: And nags.
> HARRY: Uh-hu.
> PAMELA: And nags, nags, nags, nags, nags, nags...
> HARRY: Uh-hu. Uh-hu. Uh-hu. Uh-hu-hu-hu-hu-hu-hu-hu-hu. (pp. 42-3)

The collapse of language is often denoted in plays of the French absurd by the blind accumulation of words:

> HARRY: You're a girl. You're a young female of the genus homo sapiens. Beyond that, and on our very slight acquaintance, I can

---

[56] The use of jargon (relating, in this instance, to machine part tools), as something threatening and 'otherly', reproduces directly the situation in Pinter's *Trouble in the Works*. In both plays, specific technical jargon is used by a character as a strategy to alienate.

> only describe you as a radical, pontifical, magical, comical, tragical, illogical, polemical, financial, tyrannical, anarchical, cynical, heroical, stoical, esoterical, typical, catagorical, whimsical, sceptical, dogmatical ... diabolical, angelical creature. (p. 49)

The proliferation of words evolves into a two-way incantation and sense is lost beneath the repetition of superlatives:

> VERA: He was punctual.
> PAMELA: Tidy.
> VERA: Courteous.
> PAMELA: Forgiving.
> VERA: Courageous.
> PAMELA: Well developed.
> VERA: Well dressed.
> PAMELA: Broad minded.
> VERA: Open handed. (pp. 19-20)

Despite the linguistic similitude of Campton and Ionesco, the language of *Comeback* "is free of 'meaning' ... it does not symbolise or 'mean' anything".[57] Though taking on the linguistic techniques of the absurd, Campton does not intend to devalue language:

> The characters talk oddly, very oddly - in an attempt to cajole and confuse Harry into admitting his identity ... Vera wants to make him dizzy with her language games - she becomes desperate when she realises who he is.[58]

This is not, in the manner of Beckett or Ionesco, linguistic deterioration as a reflection of a broader metaphysical collapse. It is part of the more human and recognisable technique whereby characters "attempt to cajole and confuse" one-another.

Campton's admission, that he was "immediately attracted to Ionesco's work. Probably for the wrong reasons", is highly revealing.[59] For the writer of *Comeback*, Ionesco and Beckett provided a fresh supply of resources and techniques which could be used to advantage in his own plays: "it seemed to me that here was a writer who stripped away naturalistic conventions that wasted so much time in the conventional commercial theatre. Ionesco could say more in ten minutes than the average West end offering could manage in two hours".[60] The devices of the absurd are grafted onto the 'situation comedy' format in order to enhance the impact of that format. Campton's interest in Ionesco, then, is entirely technical ("for the

---

[57] Letter to the author, 3 June 1992.
[58] Letter to the author, 5 May 1992.
[59] Letter to the author, 20 July 1990.
[60] Letter to the author, 20 July 1990.

wrong reasons"): at no point does he admit to admiring Ionesco's philosophical precepts or his ideas on the nature of the drama. Though the intentions of *Come-back* and *The Lunatic View* differ considerably, the method of both works is the same. In *The Lunatic View* the techniques of the music-hall and of television-comedy are harnessed to overtly social subjects "to tickle audiences into paying attention while slipping in the message". Though Campton overlooks the axioms of the absurd, he uses its devices with skill to communicate concrete and non-metaphysical themes.[61]

[61] McGrath's adaptation of *L'Invasion* demonstrates fundamental similarities to Campton in this respect. See Appendix III.

CHAPTER III

ABSURDISM AS A MIRROR TO SOCIETY: JOHN ANTROBUS

The reinvention of absurdism for political purposes is taken a stage further in the plays of John Antrobus.[1] Antrobus makes use of a technique, 'metaphoric synthesis', which is fundamental to the French absurd, but he reinterprets it, replacing abstract and metaphysical referents with overtly social and satirical functions.

In the plays of the French absurd there is a comprehensive synthesis of *all* aspects of the dramatic vehicle, so that the sequencing of 'plot' elements, the rhythm of the language, the arrangement of the set and the patterning of scenes, merge into a metaphoric whole. Esslin argues that the absurdist writers "confront their audience with an organised structure of statements and images that inter-penetrate one another and that must be apprehended in their totality".[2] In his 'Proust' essay, Beckett asserts that the transformations and permutations of the inner world can only be expressed metaphorically, through the integration of the language, structure and content of a literary or dramatic piece: "no attempt [should be made] to dissociate form from content. The one is the concretion of the other, the revelation of a world".[3] The close combination of form and theme facilitates the accurate depiction of the chaos of internal experience: "there will be a new form, and this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else".[4]

In Ionesco's *The New Tenant* the fusing of dominant stage-image and of language is metaphorically expressive: the accumulation on stage of masses of furniture is matched, linguistically, by the blind proliferation of words in the Caretaker's rambling and meaningless monologue. The redundancy of physical

---

[1] John Antrobus. Born in Woolich, London, 2 July 1933. Educated at Bishop Wordsworth Grammar School, Salisbury; Selhurst Grammar School, Croydon; Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. Served in the British Army, 1952-55. Freelance writer since 1955. Married Margaret McCormick in 1958 (divorced in 1980). Recipient of the George Devine Award, 1970; Writers Guild Award, 1971; Arts Council Bursary, 1973, 1976, 1980, 1982. See *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by K.A. Berney, 5th edn (London: St. James Press, 1993), p. 19.

[2] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Pelican, 1980), pp. 24-5 and pp. 45-6. See also Bernard F. Dukore, 'The Theatre of Ionesco: A Union of Form and Substance', in *Educational Theatre Journal*, 13.3 (1961), 174-81.

[3] Samuel Beckett, 'Proust and Three Dialogues: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit' (London: John Calder, 1965), p. 88.

[4] Quoted in Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 555. In interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco argues that the expression of the "living image" or the metaphoric whole depends on the integration and devaluation of theme (pp. 108-111), language (pp. 122-3) and form (pp. 160-3). Claude Bonnefoy, *Conversations with Eugene Ionesco*, trans. by Jan Dawson (London: Faber, 1970).

objects conjoins with the weight of words to swallow up the silent and passive Gentleman, the new tenant. In Boris Vian's *The Empire Builders* the prominent stage-image is again the set itself, the series of rooms into which a family travels in order to escape a deafening and mysterious noise. Throughout the play, the rooms become progressively smaller, darker, and less well defined. The erosion of the set, the limitation of the physical and spatial dimensions, is matched linguistically and structurally: the language deteriorates; the characters become overtly two-dimensional and eventually cease to function; the structure becomes so fragmented that the play is forced to falter to a premature end. The absurd play, then, must be interpreted as an inextricable whole, a metaphoric union: the 'metaphoric synthesis' embraces every aspect of the dramatic construct, correlating changes in the set with changes in the language and the structure in order to convey, in the plays of Ionesco and Vian, the impression of encroachment, the unwavering approach of death or of chaos.

To British playwrights in the late 1950s, such a comprehensive synthesis of dramatic elements proved to be problematic. Social realists were accustomed to using the stage in a representational and strictly literal fashion, recreating in their plays cross-sections of communities, straightforward depictions of the 'real' world. Those playwrights who attempted to shift from the representational to the metaphoric model were significantly more conservative than the absurdists, and often used the dramatic metaphor for simple allegorical purposes. In Charles Wood's *Spare* (1963) the antics of a group of soldiers locked in a museum are used to reflect the rhythms of oppression and injustice which the author recognises in society. Wesker's *The Kitchen* (1959) uses the kitchen setting, with all of its minor hierarchies and communication failures, as an allegorical equivalent of society at large.[5] Though metaphoric overtones are apparent in both of these plays, the authors rely solely on the allegorical properties of the narrative to represent society: language, character and structure are all conventionally employed and do not form part of the metaphor.[6]

---

[5] There are a great many plays circulating in the late 1950s and early 1960s which focus on a small community of people, using it as a metaphor for society as a whole. In Osborne's *The Entertainer* (1957), for instance, the collapse of the music hall reflects the decay of England's moral and political fabric.

[6] A limited number of British writers took the metaphoric approach slightly further. Giles Cooper's *Mathry Beacon* (1955), a composite picture of the lives of a group of soldiers trapped on a Welsh hill-side, reflects, metaphorically, man's reliance on political organisms and demonstrates the havoc created by such organisms. Cooper develops the metaphor by *presenting* havoc in the dislocated structure and in the gradual breakdown of established linguistic codes. Cooper's relationship with the absurd is discussed in Chapter VII.

Antrobus' first play, *One Orange for the Baby*, suggests that he was interested from the beginning of his career in the metaphoric potential of drama.[7] He uses the domestic conflict generated within a rural hippie commune as an allegory for the strife evident in the wider political organism.[8] Antrobus dismissed *One Orange for the Baby* soon after it was written, interpreting the metaphoric approach, as manifested in his own work and as accepted in the British theatre, as sterile and restricting: "I realised that it was a false start ... *One Orange* was too slice-of-life ... knowing no better, I had wandered into Wesker territory, I had written a neat and horribly tidy little allegory".[9]

After the "false start" of *One Orange for the Baby*, Antrobus attempted to redefine what he understood as metaphoric drama, by broadening its scope and making it at once more comprehensive and more radical. He rejected the "neat and horribly tidy" allegories which represented the extent of the metaphoric approach in British theatre, and decided to "revitalise dramatic language and plot ... all of those things", and make them metaphorically significant.[10] The hallmark of absurd theatre, the complex patterning and synthesis of linguistic and structural forms for metaphoric purposes, is evident in his second play:

> If I was to give one word of advice for an audience of *The Bedsitting Room* it would be this - look on it as a *whole* ... the things which you see on the stage, the way the characters talk to each other and what they say ... is no more important than how they say it ... and this is no more important than the way the play moves ... all of the gibberish and the cryptic developments are important ... if you look at the play from a great height a very clear picture emerges: *it presents a world.*[11]

In the plays produced after *The Bedsitting Room* (1963), all semblance of rational construction is abandoned. Chronological or sequential narrative, spatial and temporal laws, intellectual argument and psychologically credible characters are

---

[7] Though *One Orange for the Baby* was written in the1960s, it was not produced until 1980. Antrobus first sent the play to the Royal Court but it was rejected. Letter to the author, 20 February 1992.

[8] The all-embracing allegory contains many smaller metaphoric episodes which repeat the main themes. At the end of the play, for instance, one of the characters gives birth to a child which she and her husband are incapable of supporting (they are economically and emotionally retarded). The baby is disposed of by being placed in a box and posted elsewhere. For Antrobus, episodes such as this are overtly metaphoric: "our crumbling society cannot look after the weak and the helpless ... it tries to pass the buck - send the problem elsewhere ... pretend that everything is just fine". Letter to the author, 20 February 1992.

[9] Letter to the author, 30 January 1994.

[10] Letter to the author, 30 January 1994. Antrobus states that: "So much of the theatre in England was static. If a writer put so much as a symbol on stage he was called an experimentalist ... [I wanted to] show that the language used could be symbolic and that the shape of the play could be symbolic ... [and that the] sewing together of the language and the shape was also symbolic". Interview with the author, 23 August 1993.

[11] Letter to the author, 2 April 1994. Italics mine.

rejected, and instead the stage uses erratic linguistic and structural forms to reflect and to *present* the disordered, disconnected world of human experience.

Antrobus' intentions in using a comprehensive 'metaphoric synthesis' in plays after *One Orange for the Baby* differ considerably from those of the absurdists. For Ionesco and Adamov, the stage becomes a metaphor of the internal, subconscious world, which expresses the human condition in its entirety: "I try to project onto the stage an inner drama ... the microcosm being a small-scale reproduction of the macrocosm, it may happen that this tattered and disjointed inner world is in some way a reflection or a symbol of universal disruption".[12] The style of Antrobus' plays, on the other hand, reflects only the disarray of the external world, the derangement of the social organism. Though Antrobus resolved, after *One Orange for the Baby*, to broaden the extent of metaphoric drama, he continued to explore the same thematic issues which were raised in that play:[13]

> the stage is like one of the distorting mirrors in a fairground, it exaggerates the worst features of the thing which looks into it ... my plays are riotous and grotesque ... because they reflect society which is grotesque. Our society does not make sense to its inhabitants. It alienates them.[14]
>
> *The Bedsitting Room* is a play gone berserk - puppet-like characters speak gibberish, gibberish gathers more gibberish, the plot turns into gibberish. Why? Because society has gone berserk. The play is no more, no less than society in miniature ... and all of the gibberish is a mirror to political gibberish.[15]

3.1 "a shell-distorted mirror to an absurd society": *The Bedsitting Room* (1963)

The Bedsitting Room, a joint venture with Spike Milligan, provides an excellent introduction to the way in which Antrobus synthesises the various components of his plays.[16] It is possible to draw an analogy between Antrobus' metaphoric

---

[12] Eugene Ionesco, *Notes and Counter-Notes*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1964), p. 165.

[13] Though a generalised satire on social breakdown and governmental corruption, *One Orange for the Baby* alludes directly (though often fleetingly) to: the nuclear issue; the dangers of consumerism and commercialism; the loss of moral standards throughout British society; the collapse of the marital institution; the problem of homelessness.

[14] Letter to the author, 18 May 1993.

[15] Letter to the author, 30 January 1994. Antrobus stresses that his intentions were, from the start of his career, strictly social: "I have always seen myself as a keen critic of the society in which I live ... Grub about beneath the surface and you'll discover discontent - the image of a society turning in on itself and taking its people with it". Letter to the author, 9 February 1993.

[16] Though Spike Milligan co-wrote this play, it was, according to Antrobus, largely his own. Letter to the author, 9 February 1993.

technique and a piece of music in that every aspect of the play, each image, word and structural modulation, combine to create an overall effect: "I thought that society was mad, insane, nothing about it seemed to make sense - it was disjointed. I wanted to embody my impression of society in the play ... it has a rhythm ... it is anarchic and disjointed too ... it starts, stops, starts off again, somewhere else, anywhere ... the language may suddenly spin off, anywhere ... *Here we see the rhythm of society*".[17] The structural and linguistic anarchy which constitutes *The Bedsitting Room* presents what is probably Antrobus' most vivid metaphor of a "society gone berserk".

The first act proceeds as a rapidly moving series of sketches based loosely around the visit of Lord Fortnum of Alamein to his psychiatrist, Pontius Kak. Fortnum complains that he is turning into a bedsitting room:

> KAK: Will you be empty? I - er - I mean - how would you visualise yourself as this Bedsitting Room?
> FORTNUM: A brick wall with brick wallpaper over it. A plastic draining board, fluorescent lighting, red bakelite door knobs and an outside wooden karzi.[18]

This opening interaction, which concludes with Fortnum being issued with Anti-Bedsit pills, represents the only coherent development in the act, the only part of the dialogue to communicate a narrative framework. For the most part, the interaction between Fortnum and Kak consists of a shifting sequence of cross-talk and pratfalls:

> KAK: Anything else?
> FORTNUM: Yes, a small brown loaf.
> KAK: Don't say Brown say Prices and Incomes.
> FORTNUM: All right, a small Prices and Incomes Loaf.
> KAK: You got here just in time.
> FORTNUM: Why?
> KAK: We haven't got any. Is that your Horse-Drawn Rolls outside?
> FORTNUM: Yes, I acquired it from Lord Montague; he just bought a horse-drawn Mercedes from Lord Snowden.
> KAK: Not *the* Lord Snowden?
> FORTNUM: No, *a* Lord Snowden.
> KAK: Ah! The woods are full of them. Now - I didn't quite catch your name.
> FORTNUM: My card (*Pronounces 'M' Card*).
> KAK: MacCard? Scotsman eh? Wait, this card's blank.
> FORTNUM: Yes, I suffer from loss of memory. (pp. 17-18)

---

[17] Interview with the author, 23 August 1993.
[18] Spike Milligan and John Antrobus, *The Bedsitting Room* (London: Universal Tandem, 1977), p. 23.

This interaction is punctuated by a disconnected series of musical intervals, chase scenes and brief interludes involving bizarre minor characters: Mate, an ardent Socialist from the "Daz" committee, demands a fine from Kak for using an outlawed brand of washing-powder; Shelterman, a Jewish tailor, emerges from the basement, intent on selling gold lamé cocktail dresses; a vicar peddles copies of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (the latest version of the bible). Each interlude contributes to the frenzied rhythm:

> *Sound of mule raspberries. Groans. Everyone on stage leaps up and starts swiping at invisible flying things. THE PIANIST ... launches into a furious version of 'When the Lights go on again'. At the same time a SMALL MAN in a leopard skin, Army boots, great ginger wig, enters with a great club with which he batters the stage in a frenzy.* (pp. 20-1)

In Act Two it is revealed that Fortnum has transformed into a bedsitting room and that Kak has moved in with his girlfriend, to take advantage of the rent-free accommodation. This development is subsumed, again, beneath the anarchic behaviour on stage.

The eccentric momentum of events is repeated in a language which is inconsistent and disjointed, blending together associative humour, quick-fire repartee and pure gibberish. In the example of vaudeville patter, above, one joke leads immediately to another, so that the language spirals down its own channels, until the glib rapport and relentless punning are exhausted. Another linguistic technique favoured by Antrobus is the repetition of words and sentences, relished for their own inanity and irrelevance:

> FORTNUM *peers through the shop window, he takes a fish from under his arm, holds it up and says (in the grand manner)*
>
> FORTNUM: Ah! *This* must be the Plaice! (*Aside*) Not my favourite opening line actually. *My* favourite is 'Lady Teasdale by all that's damnable!' Yes, I'll try that.
>
> *Holds up fish.*
>
> FORTNUM: (*Aside*) I prompt!
> VOICE: (*Off*) Lady Teasdale by all that's damnable!
> FORTNUM: What? That's my line! (p. 15)

Those reviewers who dismiss the play as "shapeless",[19] fail to take into account the recurrent motifs which cut through each apparently random episode,

---

[19] Alan Strachan accuses Antrobus of a "lack of construction in his work, and perhaps his early script writing days which necessarily concentrated on situation comedy for character-comedians, did lead to less concentration on plot". See Alan Strachan, 'John Antrobus', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson, 2nd edn (London: St James Press, 1977), pp. 37-40 (p. 40).

and help to draw out the metaphoric propensities of the material. The pattern of 'nuclear' images which is sustained throughout the permutations of the action demonstrates that the surface anarchy has an obvious determinant.[20] The play begins with the projected image of a nuclear explosion, succeeded immediately by a baby's cry. When the baby reappears, thirty years later, as Lord Fortnum, the connection between his gradual mutation and the explosion becomes apparent: his problems are the result of radiation poisoning. In this way, the play's governing image - the transformation of the protagonist into a bedsitting room - becomes politically significant. In order to keep the issue prominent, references to the nuclear context are woven into the fabric of the play:

> Ah, radiation's falling, should be nice day tomorrow. (p. 30)
>
> How's the radiation up your way, eh? Oh, they're having it blessed by a priest. (p. 39)

The audience begins to realise that the minor characters who appear in the action (Mate, Shelter Man, Plastic Mac Man), are not simply vehicles for humour: like Fortnum, these ludicrous beings are mutants, crazy things manufactured by the nuclear age.[21]

A second tier of images, pertaining to commercialism and rampant consumerism, is integrated into, and enhances the unity of, the action. According to Antrobus: "the commercialist images explain why it all went wrong on the first place - society was held together by a blind consumerist mentality".[22] These images suggest a society which is morally bankrupt, driven by a need to acquire. Far from being arbitrary, each of the interludes of the first act centre on pecuniary transactions: Shelterman and Mate strive to exact the maximum amount of money from Fortnum. The church has swapped its role as spiritual guide to become promoter of man's consumer needs. The vicar appears with a collapsible barrow which transforms into an altar. An entrepreneur, the vicar sells gaudy religious icons along with his offer of the week: "the new combined wedding and divorce,

---

Prabhu Guptara writes: "Ambivalences and tensions are rife in all of Antrobus' plays, and it is unclear whether these result from mere self-indulgence or from a lack of critical sense. At its worst, Antrobus' indiscipline leads to monotony flabbiness and garrulity". See Prabhu S. Guptara, 'John Antrobus', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 18-20 (p. 19).

[20] Strachan writes: "What makes it more than a ragbag kind of stage Goon Show is the darker undercurrent forecast by its opening silent film of an H-Bomb explosion and the gradual realisation that the mutations in the play are the result of radiation" (p. 39).

[21] In 1972 this play was rewritten by Spike Milligan, and a third act was added. This third act is significantly more coherent than the rest, illustrating the evils of nuclear armament and of England's involvement in the Cold War. According to Antrobus, this third act, which is so heavy-handed as to resemble propaganda, was written in order to make explicit the political direction of the original play. Letter to the author, 30 January 1994.

[22] Letter to the author, 20 February 1992.

three pounds ten" (p. 59). As a major share holder in ICI, the vicar informs the characters that St Paul's has just been sold to a major corporation, who intend to transform the cathedral into a number of cathedralettes.[23] Kak relates the parable of the "handsome cross-eyed stranger", a Christ figure, who enters a community of sinners and purifies them with a baptism of washing powder. Advertising placards are lowered into the auditorium, bearing slogans such as "Buddhists use Esso".[24]

In the post-nuclear world, consumerism taints everything. The two leading political parties, "Daz" and "Lux", exercise a rigorous commercial despotism: Kak is fined for carrying a box of "Lux" in a working-class "Daz" area; Fortnum is excited about his transformation into a commercially desirable and economically rewarding property; whenever money is mentioned, all of the action stops and characters collapse to their knees singing the Hallelujah Chorus. At the end of the play a clear satirical link is developed between the consumerist mania and war. It is revealed that England's devastation is the consequence of a failed cost-cutting strategy. The government had sent the atom bomb to Russia in the post, to save the expense of launching it. Insufficient postage heralded the return of the bomb to England, where it subsequently exploded. The ruling political regime continues to favour war, but, in order to reduce travelling costs, it has signed a pact with the other nations to "kill, maim and wound their own soldiers" (p. 71).

For Antrobus, the technique of fusing the language, form and theme into a metaphoric entirety provided an opportunity to express his anti-capitalist and anti-nuclear opinions without sermonising: "Audiences don't want to be preached at - so I showed them their mad world as madly as I could ... I tried to get at them through laughter".[25] Far from being "shapeless" the anarchic structure and dis-located language present in immediate terms the image of a society driven to insanity through consumerist demands, and by a blind acceptance of the nuclear age.

---

[23] Antrobus writes, "It is, of course, an anti-nuclear play, but that's only the tip of the iceberg ... How could our government support these things? How could the Church of England justify them? ... It was hypocrisy on a massive scale ... and it was the public who suffered - as always". Letter to the author, 30 January 1994.

[24] In Ionesco's plays, man is an automaton because he has lost contact with the profoundest dimensions of his inner world, and become reliant on the meaningless and destructive aspects of a superficial external reality which has deified a false rationalism: "logic is outside of life. In logic, in dialectics, in systematologies, all the mechanisms come into play, all types of madness are possible: it is well-known that systematologies lose touch with reality". *Conversations*, pp. 110-3 (p. 111). Antrobus' automatons are the product of a social organism driven to insanity through, on the one hand, consumerism and capitalism, and, on the other, political tyranny.

[25] Letter to the author, 20 February 1992.

Though flattered by the popularity of *The Bedsitting Room*, Antrobus admits to being surprised by a general incomprehension amongst audiences, and by their tendency to acknowledge only the surface humour: "The audiences laughed and had a jolly time of it ... but they did not give much indication of appreciating the serious intention. English audiences are so literal ... they stopped short at seeing what the madness symbolised".[26] In subsequent works Antrobus repeated the metaphoric formula, with the intention of emphasising its relevance to society.[27] One of these plays, *You'll Come to Love Your Sperm Test* (1965), is outstanding in that the action develops, in true absurd fashion, beneath the threshold of consciousness, and depicts the mind fighting against the conditioning of a debauched society.

3.2 "the corruptible womb": *You'll Come to Love Your Sperm Test* (1965)

A withdrawal motif, in which a character registers his inability to operate in the social environment by retreating into his own imagined world, is repeated in many of Antrobus' later plays:

> ALOIS: Come out of your dreams ...
> ADOLF: You are saying it is not real? My experience with the Baron?
> ALOIS: I am saying you are making your reality. But you must use what is at hand around you. You must fuse your dreams into the earth.[28]

In this play, *Hitler in Liverpool*, the young Adolf, incapable of surviving in modern Germany, fabricates a social world based upon his perverse psychological needs and expectations. Reality as he experiences it becomes a projection of his internal state. The reinterpretation of reality is examined from the outside: the audience is aware that Adolf lives in a dream-world because his outward behaviour is erratic and detached. Moreover, his brother harangues him repeatedly

---

[26] Letter to the author, 18 May 1993.

[27] Antrobus admits that he and Milligan attempted to repeat the success of their first play and started on a second production, *The Incurables* (Letter to the author, 9 February 1993). Though this play was not forthcoming, most of his works of the late 1960s return to the formula of *The Bedsitting Room*. These plays are often quite repetitive and, when, read together, contain little real variety or sense of development: *Why Bournemouth?* (1968) uses suburbia as a microcosm of contemporary Britain, and explores the inanity which passes as modern living; *An Apple A Day* (1971) examines, through increasingly surreal episodes, the corruptness and viciousness endemic to the national health system.

[28] John Antrobus, *Hitler in Liverpool and other plays* (London: John Calder, 1983), p. 31. In *Captain Oates' Left Sock* (1969) the inmates of a lunatic asylum shut out a social world which they find offensive and inhuman (and which is responsible for their insanity) and they try to inhabit a Utopian fantasy world of their own making.

about the dangers of withdrawing into a self-created reality. In *You' ll Come to Love Your Sperm Test*, the external focus is gradually abandoned: it is Antrobus' only play to develop the action internally, showing the diseased imagination of socialised man from the inside.

This play has been treated summarily by critics: Elsom and Guptara overlook it; Taylor dismisses it, along with *Trixie and Baba*, as "shapeless knockabout pieces of verbal farce",[29] and Strachan refers to its "aimless facetiousness".[30] According to Antrobus, on the other hand, it is a complex work in which the stage transforms from a metaphor of a broken society to a metaphor of a broken inner world:

> My plays start in the real world - or a version of it - and they usually stay there ... *Sperm Test* has more depth - it examines from within the mental and spiritual scars brought upon the individual by society.[31]

Set in a gymnasium, the play begins with a game as frenetic and inconsequential as the caucus-race in *Alice in Wonderland*:

> ANYONE: On your mark! Get set!
>
> [*Knocking off. Crashes and bangs. One of cast rushes onstage holding doorlock without door. Key is fetched and he is let in. He fires starting pistol and yells, 'Go'.*][32]

The emphasis on movement and physicality is retained throughout the first act: characters run on and off, exercising, dancing, miming. An enigmatic ring-master, Salubrious, watches over the activity, ensuring that the relentless pace does not slacken. A fragile and undeveloped plot is instituted into this manic flux: the Artist has gone to visit his Doctor, worried that he is becoming estranged from his wife:

> ARTIST: You gave her a thorough examination, doctor?
> DOCTOR: Oh yes, oh yes, indeed.
> ARTIST: How is she?
> DOCTOR: Who?
> ARTIST: The woman you examined?
> DOCTOR: Your wife you mean?
> ARTIST: Very likely ...
> DOCTOR: Is there some doubt?
> ARTIST: Not in my mind.
> DOCTOR: Then the onus is on me.

---

[29] John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 301.
[30] Strachan, p. 40.
[31] Letter to the author, 18 May 1993.
[32] *New Writers, 4* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967), p. 111.

> ARTIST: You don't have to make an issue of it.
> DOCTOR: Who knows these days ... the pressures are intense.
> (p. 110)

As in *The Bedsitting Room*, the central predicament deteriorates into a vaudeville patter which lasts throughout the act, as Salubrious maintains the swirl of activity:

> ARTIST: I am only asking for information about my wife's health.
> DOCTOR: We can't speak here Karl ... we may be overheard ... come into my fridge ... Waiter! Two false moustaches ... Now your wife's health ... to be blunt ... good news ...
> ARTIST: You mean ...
> DOCTOR: Sound as a bell, fit as a fiddle, strong as a horse ...
> ARTIST: Anything else?
> DOCTOR: Greedy as a pig. (p. 111).

In the second act, references to a wider political context bring meaning to the apparently aimless activity. We are informed that the country is dictated by a ruling 'health' faction, the Gymnast Party, which regards physical vitality and regular exercise as essential for the model citizens:

> The day England gives up her compulsory exercise we will lose all influence in the world's top gymnasiums remember that at this moment our Prime Minister is hanging upside down from the wallbars with the American and Russian leaders holding his own. (p. 129)

The Doctor, an agent of health, and the Wife, a fitness instructor, are important advocates of the dominant regime. The action of the first act is reinterpreted in view of the political context: the manic activity and the gymnasium setting become a metaphor for a society driven by a ruthless and authoritarian fitness ethic.

Act Two focuses on the Artist's refusal to accept the dogma of health. He equates compliance with health-centrism with the relinquishing of individuality and sets out on a quest to expound the virtues of illness. The tone shifts and semi-serious dialogue replaces pure vaudeville. Like Berenger in Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, the Artist is determined to retain his personal integrity, recognising the essential inhumanity of conformism:

> DOCTOR: Oh we could do it ... together all of us in this theatre ... a group painting ... choose a courageous subject no compromise ... Health and Vitality ... portrait of a world gymnasium ... everyone bronzed laughing swinging gaily from rope to rope ...
> ARTIST: Life is not like that! ... We must organise and overthrow the gymnasts! They have no god given right to impose their standards of health and hygiene on us! ... don't you see the gymnasts aren't interested in rules of hygiene it's quite arbitrary ... all they want is obedience. (p. 151)

The tone changes again in the third act. Once the Artist has stated publicly his determination not to conform the lights dim and there is an abrupt cessation of sound and activity. According to Antrobus: "the silence and darkness must come *immediately* after the Artist voices his resolution - he has combated society consciously, now it must be done subconsciously ... the final act turns inward and looks at the mind struggling against its programming".[33] Movement becomes a sequence of symbolic episodes in which the Artist confronts a succession of changing, spectral shapes which, emerging from the darkness, represent the forces which seek to oppress him. In the first instance, the Artist is approached by two enigmatic policemen. The Inspector and the Sergeant engage in a long patterned duologue, an elegy lamenting the acceleration of crime, which returns repeatedly to the refrain: "the murders the rapes the robberies the violence the violence" (p. 153). Having completed their surreal dirge, the policemen turn upon the Artist, and interrogate him in connection with a crime which, it is later revealed, never took place. The Artist's attempts to defend himself go unheard as the men disappear into the darkness, to be replaced by an image of Christ crucified. The Artist stands dumb as Christ relates his adventures around various clubs, earning a little money with his selection of miracles. Christ's words merge into those of a couple of fairground barkers, who appear in the lighted arena as the Doctor and a Nurse. The medics inform the Artist that he is impotent:

> DOCTOR: I've just analysed your sperm test very nice too ... definite traces of arsenic ... I've brought along your certificate of impotence. (p. 164).

In spite of the Artist's barrenness, the Nurse reveals that his wife is pregnant, though governmental decree prevents the baby from entering the world. The baby is being kept in the womb which is presently being furnished with a piano and medicated wallpaper:

> DOCTOR: Instead of getting the baby out we move the furniture in ... we should ask ourselves is there any real need these days for people to leave the womb ... that's when the trouble seems to start. (p. 165)

This measure, designed to shelter the baby from the corruption of the world outside, is fruitless. As the Doctor speaks, the magnified sounds of a piano being smashed echo through the auditorium. The violence from which the baby is being

---

[33] Interview with the author, 23 August 1993.

protected has already poisoned it in the womb: prior to birth it is devoted to destruction.

As the noise of destruction fades, the darkness intensifies and the Artist begins to acknowledge his isolation. Bewildered by the sudden flux of sensations, his protestations finally silenced, he watches the world recede around him. The play ends on a haunting image of desolation:

> ARTIST: Where's the doctor? Where's he gone?
> DOCTOR: I don't know sir ...
> ARTIST: Daisy where's the doctor?
> DOCTOR: I haven't seen him ...
> ARTIST: Doctor! Doctor! Doctor!
> DOCTOR: [*faintly*] Aye ... aye aye ...
> ARTIST: Doctor where are you?
> DOCTOR: [*even more faintly*] Aye aye ...
> ARTIST: Daisy bring back the doctor.
> DOCTOR: [*Cockney, calm voice*] It's all gone sir. (pp. 165-6)

The imagistic sequence of the third act makes little sense on a rational level. Taken as a metaphoric whole, however, the sequence has the apocryphal momentum of a nightmare: a mosaic of emotionally resonant impressions, involving persecution, sterility and violence, which fade into a final Beckettian silence. The movement of these paranoid images suggests disintegration or deterioration: identity, for instance, becomes unstable and ultimately meaningless. The Inspector and the Sergeant disappear, Salubrious merges into the figure of Christ and then into the Nurse, the Doctor merges into Daisy (the Cockney maid). Neither the Nurse nor Daisy is referred to earlier in the play and their sudden appearance, blurring indistinctly out of the character of Salubrious and the Doctor, is unpredictable. The Artist's identity also becomes questionable: is he the man sought by the Inspector? Is he impotent? Does he actually have a wife? All of those things which he had taken for granted about himself are distorted. In the final moments, the Artist turns to the Doctor, seeking an explanation for his bewildering predicament:

> ARTIST: The plot ... Act I ...
> DOCTOR: [*Cockney*] It's all gone ... there's no more Act I sir. (p. 165)

The suggestion is that the formal structure has been abandoned. The plot, the framework in which the characters have meaning, has ceased to function. The Artist no longer belongs within the dramatic context of the play, hence he is deprived of the network of relationships and associations through which he might define himself.

The collection of images accumulates into a metaphor for insanity. The Artist voices his refusal to conform immediately prior to the image sequence. His decision - to fight against his own conditioning - results in paranoia. The movement of the last act reflects the shifting fearful rhythms of his madness, a nightmare depiction of his deteriorating mind. The all-embracing devaluation of dramatic tenets (the breakdown of the play itself) becomes a succinct expression of the debilitating effects of neurosis. The mind has collapsed and insanity (or even death) has prevailed: "It's all gone".

A number of anti-religious, anti-spiritual images in the closing sequence reinforce the impression of madness. The Artist is confronted by Christ on the cross, though Christ, who is, in fact, Salubrious ("healthy"), is an ardent supporter of the Gymnast Party. This idea, of spirituality and faith having become a commodity, something purchasable, is reinforced when Salubrious admits to using his power to perform miracles to make a living as a pub magician:

> SALUBRIOUS: The old loaves and fishes bit.
> DOCTOR: Yes ...
> SALUBRIOUS: Golders Green next week ...
> DOCTOR: You've got a lovely act. (p. 132)

Spirituality and faith have no place in a modern world which is quintessentially materialistic. Man has reinvented Christ, making him a vehicle for the political and the material. The final stage in the consumerisation of the divine involves the extraction of Christ's sperm for the purpose of wide-scale artificial insemination, at a cut price: "make the virgin birth democratic you see anyone can have one" (p. 134). The Wife, having been impregnated with the seed of God, is prevented from giving birth. Man is damned because the new Christ remains in the womb, smashing furniture. Antrobus warns in another play of "the corruptible womb",[34] and now his fears are realised: the violence and destructiveness of society has infected the divine. The enigmatic murder investigated by the policemen pertains not to an actual physical death but to the symbolic spoliation of the spiritual and cerebral: the inevitable consequence of an overriding consumerism and conformism.[35]

---

[34] John Antrobus, *Captain Oates' Left Sock* (London: Samuel French, 1974), p. 45.

[35] Richard Kostelanetz is the only reviewer to show any depth of appreciation of Antrobus' play: he acknowledges the shift of emphasis between the two parts, the movement from satirical to abstract considerations. Kostelanetz uses the image of two opposing mirrors to describe the metaphoric synthesis which marks the play's prevailing technique: "Although the play may start out to be a satire on the tyranny of the Sperm Test, it soon coalesces around another theme, which it sustains to the end of the play: An image of human life as hopelessly disordered; and the stage functions as two opposing mirrors reflecting this disorder upon itself to infinity". Richard Kostelanetz, 'You'll Come to Love Your Sperm Test', in *Encore*, 12.2 (1965), 46-8 (47).

Though the internalised rhythms and nihilistic tone of the final movements of *You'll Come to Love Your Sperm Test* appear to owe a great deal to Ionesco, the closing sequence has an explicitly social bias which is alien to the plays of the absurd: Antrobus internalises the action in order to demonstrate the manner in which the conditioned individual assimilates the structures of oppression which dictate his external, social circumstances. The stage presents, in absurd fashion, the inner world as it succumbs to insanity: but the madness is clearly a consequence of a deranged social organism.

As this analysis suggests, resemblances between the plays of Ionesco and Antrobus stop short at purely stylistic considerations.[36] During the early 1950s British radio comedy started to experiment with new dramatic forms which, in their flexibility, resembled those of the absurd. Marrying social and political concerns to radical forms, radio comedy pioneered a new brand of satire, one which was to have a massive influence on Antrobus.

3.3 "their own nightmare landscape":[37] *The Goon Show* and 'metaphoric synthesis'

As Ionesco's works were being performed in France from 1950 onwards, *The Goon Show*, written by Spike Milligan, was being produced simultaneously in England. In common with Ionesco's plays, the originality of the Goon plays rests on their comprehensive devaluation of established structural and linguistic forms, and the use of the devalued whole as a metaphor. Antrobus, whose first play was written with Milligan, and whose subsequent works rely heavily on Goon techniques, was the first writer to translate the Goon's radical dramatic forms from the radio to the theatre:

> I wrote a couple of Goon scripts with Spike before I started writing independently ... I was very excited by what the Goons were doing - the influence is obvious in all of my early attempts.[38]

Though critics are, on the whole, aware that Antrobus' plays represent an extension of the style of drama pioneered by the Goons, they continue to overlook the metaphoric properties of this style, and its socially-orientated intentions. Most reviewers have accepted *The Goon Show* and the plays of Antrobus at face value,

---

[36] Antrobus admits that, at the beginning of his career, he had "heard of Ionesco" but he was "no more than a name". Letter to the author, 20 February 1992.
[37] Peter Eton, 'Introduction', in *The Book of the Goons*, ed. by Spike Milligan (London: Robson, 1984), pp. 9-11 (p. 10).
[38] Letter to the author, 18 May 1993.

labelling them as expressions of an innocuous "cheerful nonsense tradition".[39] The defining characteristics of this tradition are, according to Taylor, "crazy, knockabout, verbal humour ... intricate punning and cheery brutality".[40] Elsom and Taylor concede that this cheerful nonsense genre may be regarded as 'absurd' because it is ridiculous, silly, inclined to folly, but insist that any similarities between it and absurdism proper are exclusively stylistic.[41] Prabhu Guptara's monograph on Antrobus for the *Contemporary Dramatists* series also emphasises his indebtedness to the cheerful nonsense tradition.[42] He argues that Antrobus' plays, in common with the Goon productions, are marked by "pyrotechnic fluidity", energy and buffoonery. Guptara's study, like Taylor's, contains an implicit rejection of Antrobus and 'cheerful nonsense' as nothing more than clowning which is intended as entertainment:

> If Antrobus can find a structure for his pyrotechnic fluidity ... we may find his genius properly revealed instead of the individual, energetic and zany playwright whom we have seen so far.[43]

Antrobus attributes prolonged critical misrepresentation of his plays to the failure of reviewers to understand the intentions of the 'cheerful nonsense' tradition from which his style derives: "*The Goons Show* was a lunatic kaleidoscope and in its jangling patterns our own society loomed large".[44] One of the primary purposes of *The Goon Show*, and *ITMA* before it, was satirical: both used an anarchic style to mirror the insanity of social mechanisms. Jimmy Grafton, the Goons' agent, claims that "Spike looked at the world and decided it was peopled with idiots and therefore he'd create his own parallel world of idiots".[45] The exaggerated madness of *The Goon Show* becomes a reflection of the madness in society:

---

[39] John Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 105. Taylor refers to this genre as an "underground tradition". See Taylor, p. 300.

[40] Taylor, p. 300. Though the inter-war and post-war manifestations of the 'cheerful nonsense' tradition can be found in *ITMA* and *The Goon Show*, Taylor traces its ancestry back to the Marx Brothers, W.C. Fields and S.J. Perelman (p. 300).

[41] The defining traits of Antrobus' works and of *The Goon Show* (surface anarchy, fluidity and flexibility, grotesqueness and caricature) are prevalent also in *The Bald Prima Donna*.

[42] Guptara, p. 19.

[43] Guptara, p. 20. Tynan's brief review of Antrobus' first play treats it in dismissive terms as "a clearly deranged but manically funny comedy". Kenneth Tynan, *Right and Left* (London: Longmans, 1967), p. 182. One of the reasons why Antrobus' utilisation of the stage for metaphoric purposes has been over-looked is because critics have never discussed his work in enough detail. Elsom and Taylor spend no more than two paragraphs on his work and Guptara's review is less than a page in length.

[44] Letter to the author, 30 January 1994.

[45] Quoted in Barry Took, *Laughter in the Air: An Informal History of British Radio Comedy*, rev. edn (London: Robson, 1981), p. 60.

> The lunacy of *The Goon Show* is not so incredible - it's the lunacy of our own world ... but pushed to an extreme.[46]

The primary intention of Spike Milligan was to defend the individual against a state which was becoming increasingly authoritative and corrupt.[47] Milligan comments:

> Essentially it is critical comedy. It is against bureaucracy, and on the side of human beings. Its starting point is one man shouting gibberish in the face of authority, and proving by fabricated insanity that nothing could be as mad as what passes for ordinary living.[48]

Whereas the structure of *The Goon Show*, as a mirror to modern society, is implicitly satirical, the content and incidents portrayed often constitute a more direct attack. Milligan used controversial news items as the basis for his burlesque, creating parodic versions of important contemporary topics. This technique resulted in masses of complaints by listeners and frequent movements to terminate the show:[49]

> Sacred cows went tumbling down like skittles in an alley, Establishment figures were lampooned, the props of society given a good shaking, and ivory towers stormed with total irreverence.[50]

Harry Secombe, an original Goon, reinforces this opinion:

> What Spike did try to do, though, was add a lot of side swipes at the government. He was very interested in political affairs, and not happy with how things were going ... Sometimes he went too far and got himself in a lot of bother.[51]

Michael Bentine concludes that "Spike was a discontent and often went out looking for trouble ... The magnificent rubbish of the show barely disguises his anger and his anti-authoritarian sentiments".[52]

---

[46] Harry Secombe, interview with the author, 5 June 1993.
[47] Eton p. 10.
[48] Quoted in Alfred Draper, *The Story of the Goons* (London: Severn House, 1977), p. 21. In her biography of Spike Milligan, Scudamore devotes two chapters to the development of *The Goon Show*. These chapters discuss, intermittently, aspects of Milligan's social and satirical intentions: his anti-war sentiments (p. 148); hostility to party politics (p. 149); cynicism towards politics in general and towards the royalty (p. 158); hatred of bureaucracy (pp. 165-6). See Pauline Scudamore, *Spike Milligan: A Biography* (London: Granada, 1985), pp. 148-80.
[49] Eton, p. 10.
[50] Draper, p. 27.
[51] Harry Secombe, interview with the author, 5 June 1993. See also Peter Sellers' reference to the satirical content of *The Goon Show*, in *The Goon Show Scripts*, ed. by Spike Milligan (London: Sphere, 1973), p. vii.
[52] Letter to the author, 9 November 1993.

Barry Took's analysis of British radio comedy since the 1930s, describing the manner in which the cheerful nonsense tradition developed from the loose satire of *ITMA* to the overt attacks of *The Goon Show*, ascribes the change to the growing disenchantment of the post-war generation.[53] An analysis of material from *The Goon Show* demonstrates that it is, indeed, involved with contemporary events, alluding frequently to the political climate. Spike Milligan's collection, *The Goon Show Scripts*, consists of nine sketches taken from the fifth and sixth series (October 1954 - January 1956). Two of the sketches, *The Affair of the Lone Banana* and *Foiled by President Fred*, are extended parodies of imperialism: both works describe the attempts of South American nationalists to regain political and economic control from an anachronistic, racist and self-seeking English aristocracy. In *Napoleon's Piano* and *The Hastings Flyer*, which ridicule the petty officiousness and inadequacy of local councils, the attack is brought closer to home. In some of the sketches the framework is less obviously satirical, though the material which it contains is often pointed in its criticism. The plot of *The Dreaded Batter Pudding Hurler*, for instance, revolves around the attempts of the hero, Neddy Seagoon, to track down a villain who has been terrorising the pensioners of Bexhill-on-Sea by attacking them with batter puddings. Within this apparently innocuous and surreal context, Milligan includes jokes about the insufficiency of the Welfare State, and of National Assistance, and attributes blame to corruption within local councils. The military and the police are parodied extensively: Churchill, Attlee, Eden and Bevan are lampooned. Indeed, the political disagreements between Labour and the Conservatives are reduced to the ridiculous dimensions of a clown-show with Churchill and Attlee settling their differences in a batter pudding fight.

The following extract demonstrates in detail how Milligan uses a surreal humour to convey his serious intentions:[54]

> BILL: I say - poor Neddie must have been at his wits' end! Faced with the dilemma of having to bring Napoleon's piano back from Paris, he went to the Foreign Office for advice on passports and visas.
>
> F.X. BITS AND PIECES DROPPING DOWN.
>
> CRUN: Ohh dee deee - dee, X9?
> MINNIE (*off*): X9 answering - who's that calling, buddy?
> CRUN: It's me - the Foreign Secretary. Do you know where the key to the secret document safe is?

---

[53] A succinct history of the cheerful nonsense tradition from *ITMA* (1939) to *The Goon Show* (1951) is provided in Roger Wilmut, *The Goon Show Companion: A History and Goonography* (London: Robson, 1981), pp. 13-15; and Took, pp. 28-59.

[54] *Napoleon's Piano*, no.129 (6th Series, no.4, 11 October 1955).

MINNIE: Yes - it's with the charlady.
CRUN: Do you think that's wise - she has access to all the vital British secret documents.
MINNIE: She can't read them, buddy, she only speaks Russian.
CRUN: That's a bit of luck -

F.X. KNOCKS ON DOOR.

CRUN: Ohh, that might be one of England's strolling Prime Ministers of no fixed abode.
MINNIE: Coming, Anthonyyy - coming ...
CRUN: Tell him we're very sorry.
MINNIE: Sorry for what?
CRUN: Oh, mmm - make something up.

F.X. DOOR OPENS.

MINNIE: Ahh, we're very sorry, Anthony, we - ohh, you're not the Prime Minister.
SEAGOON: Not yet, but it's just a matter of time. My name is Neddie Seagoon.
CRUN: Want to buy a white paper -
SEAGOON: No thanks, I'm trying to give them up.
CRUN: So are we.[55]

This extract is typical of the manner in which the Goons communicate their social commentary. Topical events are alluded to with machine-gun rapidity, the satire is camouflaged beneath farce and caricature. The opening section, for instance, depicting an archaic and physically collapsing Foreign Office, peopled by two imbeciles, is much more topical than its light treatment suggests. Late in September, only a couple of weeks before the show's production, it had become official that Burgess and MacLean, having fled Britain in 1951, were KGB agents. The revelation that two of England's top diplomats were working for the Russians came at a time of heightened sensitivity concerning the Cold War: the Warsaw Pact had been signed in May 1955 and the meeting of the "Big Four" at Geneva, which had opened in July, failed to reach any conclusions and collapsed in October. Written in the immediate wake of the Burgess/MacLean scandal, the Warsaw Pact and the Geneva Conference, the lampooning of the Foreign Office and of relations with Russia would have had obvious implications in 1955.

Owing to increasing tension with Russia, especially as a result of the failure of the Geneva Conference, the nuclear issue was prominant. Milligan was profoundly agitated by the nuclear issue. *The Bedsitting Room* concerns the aftermath of a nuclear war, and many of *The Goon Show* sketches satirise the issue; indeed, like many of the sketches, *Napoleon's Piano* ends to the sound of rocket fire. The burlesque of Anthony Eden, who took over as Prime Minister in

---

[55] *The Goon Show Scripts*, p. 83.

April, develops the nuclear theme. Eden continued Churchill's policy of retaining nuclear war-heads for defence purposes and issued a white paper to that effect. Neddie Seagoon's determination to "give up" white papers reflects the general discontent with such government legislation.

Seagoon's comment that he may soon be Prime Minister broadens the issues. Though Eden had been in power for only six months, he had adopted a legacy of domestic problems from Churchill which made him highly unpopular. His first main problem was a long-term dock strike which forced him, after less than two months in office, to declare a state of emergency in Britain. This problem was aggravated severely by a two month rail strike in May and June of that year and, after the announcement in July of an 18% rise in coal prices, large-scale protesting. Though referred to casually in this instance, Eden's domestic crises are, generally, a source of a great deal of Goon humour and are elaborated upon later in the sketch.

Through the synthesis of a structure "as exhausting as a whirling dervish"[56] and a language which "chirrups, whistles ... explodes like fireworks"[57] *The Goon Show* builds up a comprehensive metaphor of insanity which mirrors the insanity of the political organism. Owing to the close partnership between Milligan and Antrobus, at the beginning of Antrobus' career as a playwright, a channel was opened up for the transference of this radical form of satire to the theatre. Stylistically, Antrobus' plays represent the nearest that British drama got to the production of a home-grown equivalent to Ionescan absurdism. No other dramatists of the English 'absurd' make such consistent and extensive use of what has been termed 'metaphoric synthesis'; but even here the synthesis, when closely inspected, will be seen to reveal its own exclusively social and satirical referents. Antrobus concludes:

> If the Theatre of the Absurd was designed to target "spiritual" or "philosophical" problems I cannot rightly stake a claim as a member of that movement ... The God who appears in *The Bed-sitting Room* is a man-made God who is bought and sold ... God and man and nuclear bombs - everything is a commodity these days ... *these* are problems which I am preoccupied with and I think they are social in origin ... the madness which you identify in the structure [of the plays] is the theme of the plays too ... madness cannot be [called] a "spiritual" malady when one considers some of the things which have happened in the twentieth century.[58]

---

[56] Harry Secombe, interview with the author, 5 June 1993.
[57] Harry Secombe, interview with the author, 5 June 1993.
[58] Interview with the author, 23 August 1993.

PART II

THE 'PURE' ABSURD

Writers of the Absurd failed to attract much attention ... this is a tragedy for our theatre because there were some British Absurdists whose ideas rivalled those of Beckett and Ionesco.[1]

[1] Charles Dyer, letter to the author, 11 October 1993.

PART II: THE 'PURE' ABSURD

Having discussed, in Part I, some of the deflections and modifications of absurdism in England in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the second part of this thesis investigates more orthodox expressions of the genre. Part II examines the works of the 'pure' absurdists, those English playwrights who managed, by avoiding the attractions of social drama and of realism, to create a metaphysical theatre which had pronounced affinities with the French absurd. This section begins with a survey of the aesthetic and epistemological intentions of Ionesco and other leading absurdists, paying particular attention to their desire to communicate a new sense of dramatic reality.[1] Ionesco's theories are compared, in Chapter IV, with those of the 'pure' absurdists in England: Anne Jellicoe, John Grillo and N.F. Simpson. In place of the limited surface reality of standard realism, Ionesco and the 'pure' English absurdists posit a form of theatre which attempts to reflect man's subconscious world as manifested in his dreams, fantasies and his most rudimentary impulses. In their dramatic recreation of man's internal world, which demands a radical devaluation of form and language, each of these writers strives to convey the darker realities of the human condition.[2]

Ionesco's absurd manifesto is outlined in *Notes and Counter-Notes* (1962) and *Conversations with Eugene Ionesco* (1966). Two motifs recur throughout these theoretical writings: the search for an internal reality and the rejection of the rational-social structures which dictate external reality.[3] Richard Coe argues that Ionesco's works can only be understood in terms of his abandonment of a

---

[1] Even though this section deals specifically with Ionesco and Artaud, their theories of an internal or dream theatre are shared by other absurdists, such as Beckett, Adamov and Arrabal. See Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (London: John Calder, 1962), pp. 133-207; Peter L. Podol, *Fernando Arrabal* (Boston: Twayne, 1978), pp. 26-9; Thomas John Donahue, *The Theatre of Fernando Arrabal: The Garden of Earthly Delights* (New York: New York University Press, 1980), pp. 59-62; John H. Reilly, *Arthur Adamov* (New York: Twayne, 1974), pp. 62-8. Kenner's pioneering study of Beckett's interior drama is developed by Knowlson and Pilling whose book presents a detailed analysis of Beckett's late period "in which an always cerebral artist has been engaged in an unprecedented archaeological investigation, or better, 'ontospeleology', as Beckett himself describes it". See James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull* (London: John Calder, 1979), p. xiii.

[2] Antonin Artaud, a predecessor of French absurdism, uses the word 'dark' in connection with the type of reality expressed by his style of drama. For him, theatrical reality should be a dark one, that is, a subconscious one, shaded by the surface (rational and conscious) reality of conventional realistic theatre. Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, trans. by Victor Corti (London: Calder, 1993), p. 21.

[3] A third motif, born of the rejection of external reality, is also significant: Ionesco suggests that the images of chaos and destruction which inhabit the inner world mirror the greater suffering of the human condition.

rationalism which he found limited and decadent.[4] Rationalism relies on the observation of the external and the empirical and upon the objectification of all phenomena. But according to Ionesco, not everything can be externalised and objectified: man has a complex and contradictory interior world which is not reducible to the laws of logic or rationalism (Ionesco uses these terms interchangeably). The attempt of rationalism to "make an objective reality out of subjectivity" leads to the mechanisation of man: that is, man adheres so thoroughly to the external world of logic that he denies his own rich and essentially human interior life.[5] Rationalism and logic, then, represent the reduction of all that is essentially human and internal to a series of explainable and mechanical external laws. The separation of man from his interior self (as seen in *The Bald Prima Donna* and *Jack*) results in insanity: "rationalism leads to madness".[6]

Ionesco's rebellion against the theatre is based upon the same premise as his distrust of reason.[7] Major theatrical traditions from realism to epic drama concentrate, in the same manner as rationalism, upon the external. Writers from Brecht to Osborne are dismissed by Ionesco as restricted and unimaginative because their plays focus solely upon the limited surface of behaviour, on external reality. They depict life in terms of *public* utterances and *social* interactions:

> Realism, socialist or not, never looks beyond reality. It narrows it down, diminishes it, falsifies it and leaves out of account the obsessive truths that are most fundamental to us: Love, death and wonder. It presents man in a perspective that is narrow and alien.[8]

Ionesco recognises a variety of means for exploring internal realities or the "obsessive truths" which are embedded in the subconscious: imagination, fantasy and dream all provide access into the inner world. In the dream, in particular, one discovers an unadulterated expression of the fundamental reality of the human condition:

> I attach great importance to dreams because they give me a sharper, more penetrating vision of myself. Dreaming is thinking. But much deeper, truer, more authentic than ordinary thinking ... A dream is a kind of meditation, of communion with oneself ...

---

[4] Richard Coe, *Ionesco: A Study of his Plays*, rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 26-9.
[5] Claude Bonnefoy, *Conversations with Eugene Ionesco*, trans. by Jan Dawson (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 111.
[6] *Conversations*, p. 113.
[7] See George E. Wellwarth, 'Beyond Realism: Ionesco's Theory of the Drama', in *The Dream and the Play: Ionesco's Theoretical Quest*, ed. by Moshe Lazar (Malibu: Undena, 1982), pp. 33-47 (pp. 39-44).
[8] Eugene Ionesco, *Notes and Counter-Notes*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1964), p. 14.

> Sometimes it can be extremely revealing, and extremely cruel. It has an absolutely luminous and inescapable clarity ... To be more concise, I think that the dream is a lucid thought, more lucid than when one is awake, a thought expressed in images, and that at the same time its form is always dramatic.[9]

> Truth is in our dreams, in the imagination....[10]

To ensure the successful communication of the internal reality, Ionesco attempted to write plays when in a "dream-state ... governed by the extra-conscious logic of the dream".[11] *Victims of Duty*, *Hunger and Thirst*, *The Chairs*, and *A Stroll in the Air* were all written in such a state: growing out of an initial series of images without any conscious effort.[12] Each of these plays assumes the movement or flux of the dream-state of the author, they branch out and develop in accordance with the dictates of its own extra-conscious dynamic:

> [they] grew like trees as I wrote them: trees growing neither with the willpower of ordinary consciousness nor in defiance of it, growing without taking into account the consciousness which is there and which observes their growth.[13]

Many other plays, such as *Amédée*, *Rhinoceros* and *Jack* are transpositions of actual dreams, or parts of dreams, which the author has had.[14] Some of the plays of Adamov and Arrabal are also dramatic renditions of actual dreams: Arrabal claims that his plays are "direct manifestations of my inner world as revealed through my dreams ... The visual - the dream - is my starting point".[15]

In order to recreate the dream accurately the playwright must write automatically, avoiding the artificial restrictions of grammar and syntax:

> When I'm writing plays, I don't really cross out at all. It's a different mental process entirely. I allow my mind a freedom that I don't allow it when I'm writing an article where things need to be logically linked, and the language has to be clear and coherent.[16]

Fidelity to the dream-state demands that the writer be on his guard against the cosmetic and unnatural interventions of conscious (and, even worse, rational) thought:

---

[9] *Conversations*, p. 10.
[10] *Notes*, p. 27.
[11] *Conversations*, p. 70. See David Bradby, *Modern French Drama, 1940-1990*, 2nd rev. edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 78.
[12] *Conversations*, p. 33, pp. 70-1.
[13] *Conversations*, p. 71.
[14] *Conversations*, p. 74.
[15] See Christopher Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre, 1982-1992* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 117-22 (p. 118).
[16] *Conversations*, p. 71.

> I try to prevent discursive thought or day-time consciousness from creeping in, I allow images to surface as freely as possible ... Conscious thought is always interfering and stopping the images from surfacing spontaneously.[17]

Though faithful to the spontaneous outpouring of his subconscious, Ionesco is careful to prevent his plays from becoming shapeless. The only time when conscious thought is provided access into the writing process is at the end, once the dream-state has been exhausted and the subconscious images have been transcribed onto the page. At this stage Ionesco gives in to the process of 'lucidity', sifting through the material in order to re-shape it for the purposes of emphasising its inherent 'meaning':

> I believe that there must be in a writer ... a mixture of spontaneity, unawareness and lucidity; a lucidity unafraid of what spontaneous imagination may contribute. If lucidity is required of him, *a priori*, it is as though one shuts the floodgates. We must first let the torrent rush in, and only then comes choice, control, grasp comprehension. But, I repeat, I do not have this lucidity when I start writing.[18]

One aspect of external reality which Ionesco actively avoids is the social. Dedication to social phenomena reflects a whole-hearted acceptance of limited external reality. He argues that "man cannot be explained by his social organisation, his social machinery ... the deepest level of our society is extra-social".[19] One of Ionesco's most extended defences of non-social and non-external theatre can be found in his communication with Tynan, published in *The Observer* in June 1958. Tynan criticises Ionesco for his apparent self-indulgence: unlike the drama of the social realists and Brechtians, Ionesco's plays offer pessimism and nihilism, and avoid suggesting solutions.[20] Ionesco responds:

> Mr Tynan seems ... to acknowledge only one plane of reality: what is called the 'social' plane, which seems to me to be the most external, in other words the most superficial ... But that is not all; it is not enough to be a social realist writer, one must also, apparently, be a militant believer in what is known as progress. The only worth-while authors ... would be those who thought in a certain clearly defined way, obeying certain pre-established principles or directions. This would be to make the 'main road' a very narrow one; it would considerably restrict the planes of reality and limit the field open to the investigations of artistic creation.[21]

---

[17] *Conversations*, p. 72.
[18] *Notes*, p. 124.
[19] *Notes*, p. 114.
[20] *Notes*, pp. 90-2.
[21] *Notes*, p. 94.

Ionesco regards himself as a 'social' writer only in so far as his plays reflect the sub-rational, sub-political anxiety and despair which hides in the collective unconscious. 'Society' must be reinvented as a specifically subconscious phenomenon: it is the lowest common denominator of humanity, that point at which all men come together, in the recognition of chaos and death which lay at the centre of the mind.[22]

Ionesco's critical writings are peppered with defences of his plays against those reviewers determined to interpret them from a 'social' point of view. *Rhinoceros*, for instance, is arguably his most thoroughly externalised play. The simple plot, of mankind evolving into rhinoceroses, has been interpreted as an allegory for the spread of nazism or totalitarianism. Ionesco dismisses such reviewers as "sociologists who believe only in society and ignore the cosmos from which they keep us separate".[23] His own interpretation avoids social referents: the play is not an allegory of specific external events, it is a metaphor for man's emotional and mental dehumanisation; a demonstration of the ease with which thought, weakened beneath the weight of false logic, can be perverted and collectivised. Even this, the least internalised of his works, has an essentially subconscious focus.[24] In the same way, Ionesco rejects those reviewers eager to interpret *The Killer* as a satire on urbanisation: when understood as an exploration of internal reality, the play becomes an investigation of spiritual decay.[25]

Evidence from Ionesco's plays supports his theories of internal reality.[26] The internalisation process often develops on two levels: that of the author and that of the protagonist. Though the structure of a play reflects the movements of the author's internal world, its subject is often the exploration of the subconscious mind-scape of a predominant character. Many of Ionesco's plays begin in the 'external' world, but they do not remain at this level. A common factor uniting most of his protagonists is their dream of light and space which contrasts with the external world of proliferation and claustrophobia to which they belong. In *The Killer*, for instance, Berenger imagines a perfect city which is radiant with light. Amédée verbalises the act of poetry-writing in terms of liberation and release, "the images are rising ... the words are taking flight ... everything's on the

---

[22] *Notes*, p. 95. See also Ionesco's essay, 'Why do I Write?'. This essay posits a 'depoliticisation' of theatre, replacing superficial social and political anxieties with deeper metaphysical concerns. *Gambit*, 8.32 (1978), 64-73.
[23] *Notes*, p. 118.
[24] *Conversations*, p. 70.
[25] *Conversations*, p. 30-1.
[26] Rosette Lamont's study of *Journey to the Kingdom of the Dead* demonstrates in detail the manner in which the dream reality operates in Ionesco's play. See Rosette C. Lamont, '*Journey to the Kingdom of the Dead*: Ionesco's Gnostic Dream Play', in Lazar, pp. 93-119.

move".[27] This moment of inspiration, of mental and emotional elevation above the cumbersome world of meaningless objects, results in a vision of freedom, described in terms of light: "the room is flooded with sunshine ... a glorious light".[28] Jean in *Hunger and Thirst* also tries to free himself from an external world described in terms of darkness and discordancy. In the second scene he leaves the "rather dark room"[29] of external reality and arrives in a wide, mountainous terrain of brilliant light and space: "What wonderful light! I've never seen anything so pure ... I like clarity ... This is the kingdom of light".[30] This place, like the radiant city at which Berenger eventually arrives in *The Killer*, is not simply another part of the external world but represents the mind-scape, the subconscious of the protagonist: both Berenger and Jean journey *inwards*. Ionesco is anxious to emphasise this point, arguing that the radiant city is a metaphor for the final destination of Berenger's subconscious odyssey.[31] Amédée also travels into his subconscious: the second act represents his journey "*into [his] memories, into the present and the future*".[32] Choubert makes a similar mental pilgrimage in *Victims of Duty*: the external world shifts as he moves deeper into his thoughts and the stage becomes a visual representation of his mind.

None of Ionesco's protagonists succeeds in discovering his symbolic world of light.[33] As Choubert pushes deeper into his subconscious he is eventually choked with mud and slime;[34] Amédée discovers a "damp dark valley, a marsh that sucks you down until you drown";[35] in his radiant city, Berenger is stabbed to death by that fundamental nihilism, the killer, which is at the core of his interior world; Jean encounters, in the spacious panoramas of his subconsciousness, images of cruelty, proliferation and incarceration which turn him to an automaton.[36] In many of Ionesco's shorter plays the central dramatic images becomes a stark metaphor for the state of the subconscious: in *The New Tenant* and *The Chairs* the ceaseless and random accumulation of objects represents the over-burdening and eventual destruction of the subconsciousness. Disjointed

---

[27] *Plays: Volume Two*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: Calder, 1978), p. 196.
[28] *Plays: Volume Two*, p. 197.
[29] *Plays: Volume Seven*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968), p. 9.
[30] *Plays: Volume Seven*, p. 37.
[31] *Conversations*, p. 31.
[32] *Plays: Volume Two*, p. 198.
[33] Coe, pp. 78-81 (p. 78).
[34] *Plays: Volume Two*, p. 282.
[35] *Plays: Volume Two*, p. 198.
[36] David Bradby argues that the recurrent motif linking all of these subconscious images of darkness and proliferation is death. Those characters who attempt to escape the rational-material mentality and who touch upon the inner world of the subconscious discover that even the internal world is discordant. There is no ultimate escape from the chaos of a life which ends in complete and inevitable annihilation. Bradby, p. 80.

rational jargon has displaced those impulses and dreams which once constituted man's internal reality.

The theoretical writings of Antonin Artaud, one of the pioneers of the French surrealist movement during the 1920s and 1930s, might be regarded as a prototype of the absurd. *The Theatre and its Double* (1938) draws the same parallel as *Notes and Counter-Notes* between realism and rationalism, attacking a realistic convention which relies almost entirely upon the spoken word.[37] As language addresses itself "primarily to the mind",[38] word-bound realism is essentially a rational and "analytical theatre" (p. 66). According to Artaud, reality lies beneath the surface observations and movements of the rational mind, so that a much greater reality is to be found in the interior world: "A real stage play upsets our sensual tranquillity, releases our repressed subconscious" (p. 19).

For Artaud, man's subconscious world is a confused one of conflicting impulses and contradictory drives, of "inner struggles" (p. 20); it is a "mental forest" (p. 49), a "maze" (p. 45). It is the duty of the playwright to explore the subconscious and to recreate it on stage:

> theatre ought to pursue a re-examination of ... all aspects of an inner world, that is to say man viewed metaphysically. (p. 71)

In this respect the play must reflect the movement of our dreams and imagination, the main vehicles through which the subconscious world is expressed:

> both the upper and lower strata of the mind will play their part. The reality of the imagination and dreams will appear on a par with life. (p. 82)

Artaud proposes that the function of the playwright is similar to that of the psychoanalyst. By facing man with a dramatic reconstruction of the internal reality of his own warring drives and impulses, the playwright goes some way towards helping him to resolve those conflicts (pp. 60-1). For this reason, his is a *Theatre of Cruelty*, one which forces man into a painful acceptance of his internal distress and suppressed anxieties (p. 60):

> It restores all our dormant conflicts and their powers ... Here a bitter clash of symbols takes place before us, hurled one against the other in an inconceivable riot ... These symbols are symbols of full-blown powers held in bondage until that moment and unusable in real life. (pp. 18-19)

---

[37] General studies of Artaud's theory for a new theatre can be found in Martin Esslin, *Artaud* (London: John Calder, 1976), pp. 65-95; Ronald Hayman, *Artaud and After* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977),
pp. 76-101 (pp. 84-6); Innes, pp. 59-94 (pp. 59-69).

[38] Artaud, *The Theatre and its Double*, p. 27.

David Rudkin, whose first play *Afore Night Come* (1962) has been associated with the theatre of cruelty, acknowledges the essentially subconscious-psychoanalytical definition of 'cruelty':

> I think that critics misunderstood his 'cruelty' as 'violence' - whereas Artaud professed a theatre that cut into the spectator at very tender and raw places. Artaud believed that drama should be like a dream the audience are having - putting them in touch with pre-cultural and infra-cultural aspects of themselves.[39]

If, as Artaud suggests, language reflects a limited rationalism, then the sub-rational theatre must be sub-verbal. The first stage in the creation of a theatre of cruelty must be the jettisoning of language (pp. 26-7). In place of language Artaud proposes "spatial poetry" which consists of the complete utilisation of movement, sound and technical machinery, "music, dance, plastic art, mimicry, mime, gesture, voice inflexion, architecture, lighting and decor." (p. 28). He discusses Balinese dance-drama as an illustration of this type of total theatre. Balinese drama, based on popular oriental myths, elevates sound and movement to the status of ritualism, evolving into the quintessential expression of man's profoundest impulses:

> This constantly mirrored interplay passing from a colour to a gesture from cries to movements, endlessly leads us along rough patches that are difficult for the mind, pitching us into that uncertainty, that indescribably anxious state most suited to poetry.[40] (p. 45)

As Esslin points out, Artaud had formulated some of the basic tendencies of the theatre of the absurd by the early 1930s, especially in his rejection of language and his use of central images and symbols to convey mood and meaning.[41] Artaud and Ionesco alike challenged the restrictions and falsifications of conventional theatrical realism by turning their gaze inwards to what they conceived of as the greater and fundamental realities of the subconscious world. The techniques evolved to ensure an accurate reflection of the internal landscape are exhaustive, and include the automatic reproduction, in dramatic form, of one's dreams and fantasies; the creation on stage of metaphors for the inner world; and the development of extra-linguistic devices in order to transcend the "rational and analytic" intentions of realism. In tracing the development of a 'pure' absurdism

---

[39] David Rudkin, letter to the author, 19 May 1993.
[40] For a more comprehensive understanding of Artaud's ideas on 'total' theatre see his essay, 'On the Balinese Theatre', pp. 36-49.
[41] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Pelican, 1980), p. 384.

in England, the following chapters analyse how British playwrights appropriated and emulated these aesthetic devices and thematic motifs.

CHAPTER IV

PRESENTING A DARKER REALITY: THE ABSURD VISIONS OF ANN JELLICOE, JOHN GRILLO, N.F. SIMPSON AND STANLEY EVELING

Theoretical frameworks developed by Ann Jellicoe and John Grillo at the beginning of their careers as dramatists have a great deal in common with those of Ionesco, and are based on a recognition of the inadequacies of theatrical realism and of the limitations of the systems of thought supported by the realistic convention. Jellicoe and Grillo renounce external reality and turn instead to an experimental form of drama which incorporates the movement of the human subconscious. Grillo explains his reaction against theatrical realism in terms remarkably similar to Ionesco's: what is accepted as realism in the theatre communicates, he believes, a counterfeit reality which concentrates solely upon the cosmetic and partial events of surface behaviour. Osborne's 'realistic' work, for example, "appeared as not only superficial but also as falsification of reality":[1]

> As far as I could see, this Realism or so-called "Naturalism" had very little to do with nature ... reality cannot be contained in impressive speeches about one's feelings. And it can't be found in weeping and fighting and all of those external manifestations which Osborne relies on. There are deep and frightening levels of our personality which these "Realists" were not even considering - the irrational and intangible movements of our private thoughts and fantasies ... the hieroglyphics of the dream.[2]

In reaction against the surface-based 'reality' accepted as the standard of conventional drama, Grillo has attempted to create "a theatre that has abandoned social realism for poetic fantasy".[3] His first play, which involves a "writing out of private obsessive fantasies"[4] and "a mapping of intestinal truths",[5] relies on internal motifs. He argues that fantasy (cerebral and sexual) is one of the most natural expressions of the realities of the inner world:

> Surely the obsessive fantasy touches naturally and honestly upon the reality within ... Our dreams, daydreams, nightmares, even our

---

[1] John Grillo, 'An Excess of Nightmare', *Gambit*, 6.23 (1973), 18-24 (19).
[2] John Grillo, letter to the author, 8 May 1993.
[3] 'An Excess of Nightmare', 18.
[4] Quoted in John Elsom, 'John Grillo', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, 4th edn, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 216-8 (p. 217).
[5] Letter to the author, 11 February 1993.

> sexual cravings are like our profoundest anxieties, they come closest to telling us *what we really are*. [6]

> this poetic fantasy ... was also a 'new realism' designed to show man, not as he is presented through television commercials and the Hollywood version of life, but as he 'really' is.[7]

Fantasy is "poetic" because the rhythm of his first play, as a reflection of man's internal experience, assumes the flux and rhapsodic flow of the subconscious, whereby the emanations of the psyche are encapsulated in a form which recreates the rhythm of one's inner poetry. Grillo comments that "the play flows to the rhythm of the fantasy, it is not structured ... A rigid form would kill the fantasy, it would become something artificial and external to me".[8]

According to Ann Jellicoe, realism focuses too narrowly on external behaviour and ascribes too much significance to the trappings of the outer world:

> Pushing a salt-pot from one side of a table to another ... is, in a sense, realistic ... [but] this is only the beginning ... what motivates a person to push that pot? ... which forces mingled to produce the action? ... the abstract motives are more 'real' to me.[9]

> My dislike of surface decoration grows ... we are becoming too concerned with form for form's sake, we are being pushed into a kind of desperate smartness.[10]

"Surface decoration" refers to "the piling on of repeated gestures and platitudes which are purport to be meaningful insights into our unconscious".[11] To avoid the dangers of "piling on" surface observations, Jellicoe suggests that the dramatist approach his subject "from the inside ... to see what is going on in the unconscious".[12] The dramatic event should be an internal one: "The theatrical experience is unconscious, subjective, powerful".[13]

In her first play Jellicoe attempts to reconstruct on stage the subconscious world by allowing her "internal sensations" or "intuitions" to dictate the action:

> *The Sport of My Mad Mother* is a play of and for the intuitions ... intuition is far more important than intellect. When we use the

---

[6] Interview with the author, 29 August 1993.
[7] 'An Excess of Nightmare', 19.
[8] Letter to the author, 8 May 1993.
[9] Interview with the author, 30 August 1993.
[10] Ann Jellicoe, 'Preface', in *Shelley or The Idealists* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 13-20 (p. 16).
[11] Letter to the author, 20 February 1993.
[12] Interview with the author, 30 August 1993.
[13] Ann Jellicoe, *Some Unconscious Influences in the Theatre*, The Judith Wilson Lecture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), p. 11.

> intellect we are killing intuition and the reality of our deepest feelings, our pre-rational knowledge.[14]

Intuition, for Jellicoe, represents those subconscious impulses which lay beneath the threshold of reason: "[The dramatist] doesn't want to appeal to reason, rationalisation, objectivity ... No. The appeal in the theatre must be to the senses, emotions and instincts".[15] The means by which Jellicoe creates her internal reality on stage resemble those of Artaud:[16]

> So we have colour, movement, rhythmical and musical sounds and use of words, and we have appeals to the half conscious and unconscious: symbols, myths and rituals.[17]

The 'new' reality, as Jellicoe and Grillo present it in their first plays, *The Sport of My Mad Mother* (1958) and *Gentlemen I...*, cannot accommodate those social considerations which are inherent to the external world. Jellicoe comments:

> Critics have tried to pin sociological 'explanations' on to my play because it deals ostensibly with "modern youth" ... These are *not* characters in the traditional sense, they are not people ... [they are] fragments of certain over-riding emotions and impulses ... These abstractions play out the violence and frustration found in both audience and writer - they belong to our collective subconscious.[18]

Grillo repeats this sentiment:

> It is impossible to think of it [*Gentleman I...*] as a social play. Perhaps you should think of it as a therapy session, in the way that Ionesco's plays are therapy ... My obsessions are examined in a cloudy sort of way - how can we not be cloudy when dealing with

---

[14] Interview with the author, 30 August 1993.

[15] *Some Unconscious Influences in the Theatre*, pp. 17-18.

[16] Despite Jellicoe's efforts, Artaud was not to influence the British theatrical consciousness until 1964. In this year Peter Brook and Charles Marowitz ran an open workshop session in the LAMDA drama school theatre, under the general title of 'The Theatre of Cruelty'. This season provided a representative mixture of various avant-garde genres, including episodes from Genet's *The Screens* and the first British performance of *The Spurt of Blood*. Inspired by what he had learned from Artaud, Brook went on to produce in 1964 England's first full scale play in the spirit of Artaud, Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*. The relationship between Jellicoe and Artaud is discussed in Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama, 1890-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 419-20.

[17] *Some Unconscious Influences in the Theatre*, p. 18.

[18] Letter to the author, 11 December 1993. Michelene Wandor's argument that "*The Sport of My Mad Mother* is ... explicitly about the concept of gender roles" exemplifies the type of critical misjudgement which Jellicoe rejects (indeed, in interview with author, Jellicoe comments on Wandor's "extremism and tunnel-vision"). Though Wandor acknowledges that Jellicoe's characters are "dislocated, inhabiting a non-real world", she overlooks the fact that the action is internalised, and she insists that the play's rituals are gender-based and sociological. Michelene Wandor, *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 43-9 (p. 44).

> buried things unspoken and unseen? ... the context is internal and private, but it is public property because these things are universal.[19]

The sub-social, sub-rational world into which the audience is taken, the universal condition as presented by both authors, is bleak. For Grillo, the subconscious drives and fantasies which inform his first play are invariably egocentric, sadistic and salacious.[20] His first play reflects the baser, repressed components which constitute contemporary man. Ionesco and Grillo share a nihilistic vision of degraded humanity, of a "darker reality beneath our smooth facades":[21]

> One will look in vain not only for a happy ending but for an ending that is not so utterly negative that as one reels out of the theatre one mutters to oneself 'No no. This cannot be a true vision of life. It must not be'.[22]

4.1 Ann Jellicoe and the appeal to the realities of the subconscious

The similarity between Jellicoe's first play, *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, and the early works of Ionesco, stretches further than both writers' rejection of realism and their emphasis upon internal realities. Jellicoe is the only writer of the English 'absurd' for whom the process of writing a play is as significant as the finished product.[23] In order to communicate with her audience on a sub-rational level, Jellicoe was careful to avoid, during the act of creation, intellectual reflection:

> I realised that to plan ahead intellectually by means of thought and notes ... eventually limited the work and threatened to kill its freshness and life.[24]

For this reason, she wrote the play spontaneously, in an impulsive and subconsciously receptive mood reflecting Ionesco's dream-state:

---

[19] John Grillo, interview with the author, 29 August 1993.
[20] John Grillo, interview with the author, 29 August 1993.
[21] 'An Excess of Nightmare', 19.
[22] 'An Excess of Nightmare', 20.
[23] Ann Jellicoe. Born in Middlesbrough, 15 July 1927. Educated at Polam Hall, Darlington and the Central School of Speech and Drama. Married Roger Mayne in 1962. Between 1947-1951 she acted and directed throughout London and in the provinces. She was the founding director of the Cockpit Theatre Club in 1952; a lecturer and director at the Central School of Speech and Drama, 1954-56; and literary manager at the Royal Court Theatre, 1973-75. See *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by K.A. Berney, 5th edn (London: St. James Press, 1993), pp. 332-33.
[24] Ann Jellicoe, 'Something of Sport', *Encore*, 5.1 (1958), 25-7 (25).

> perhaps twenty pages at a time were written quickly loosely and quite without overall guiding thought, without knowing what would come next.[25]

The play had neither characters nor plot elements during its initial creation. Jellicoe's subconsciously revealing writing manifested itself as an impulsive flow of emotions and images on to the page: "the words they used were meaningless sounds to release emotion".[26] Jellicoe explains that: "these were not characters in the conventional sense ... they were patterns of feelings, intuitions".[27]

The process of spontaneous creation completed, Jellicoe embarked upon the second stage of making lucid the emanations of her subconscious:

> I looked at the fragment and asked; "What sort of people would behave like this?" and so began to build character.[28]
>
> When the impetus was spent there came a pause during which one considered what had been written: what was it about? How could it be made more clear?[29]

The Sport of My Mad Mother was completed in five months, the result of an alternating process of stream-of-consciousness and 'lucidity'. The writing process matches that of Ionesco exactly: a long period of spontaneous creation is followed by an even more exhausting process in which the author attempts to shape his material so as to emphasise its inherent 'meaning' without changing or biasing that meaning. In this way, both Jellicoe and Ionesco can be true to an internal reality, whilst making that reality comprehensible.[30]

4.2 "bodying forth the deepest human urges": *The Sport of My Mad Mother* (1958)

Jellicoe envisages the internal experience as a flux, analogous to the rhythm of music, the flow of blood, the movement of a river:

---

[25] 'Something of Sport', 25.

[26] Quoted by John Russell Taylor, 'Ann Jellicoe', *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson (London: St James Press, 1973), pp. 409-13 (p. 410).

[27] Interview with the author, 30 August 1993.

[28] Taylor, 'Ann Jellicoe', p. 410.

[29] 'Something of Sport', 25.

[30] Esslin discusses the complex inter-relationship between the processes of inspiration and construction and the finished product of an absurd play. His description is as applicable to Jellicoe as it is to Ionesco: "Instead of linear development, they present their author's *intuition* of the human condition by a method that is essentially *polyphonic*; they confront their audience with an organised structure of statements and images that inter-penetrate one another and that must be apprehended in their *totality*, rather like the themes in a symphony, which gain meaning by their simultaneous interaction". Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Pelican, 1980), pp. 45-6. Italics mine.

> Imagine the river sweeping on, turbulence and calm coexist within the same stretch of water ... or the harmonies, discords, the changes of tempo which join together in the same piece of music ... here is the subjective experience.[31]

Rhythm and counter-rhythm, alterations in the beat and tempo, combine to express the mood of a musical piece and the internal topography alike. Communication takes place on a sub-rational level:

> But what I like most is the way music reaches into you. I just want to reach people, I want to make them feel, and with music somehow ... music communicates, it reaches into people and they can forget their brains, their intellect and the way they've been taught to intellectualise about everything.[32]

The movement of *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, as an expression of the author's internal life, can be understood as a musical score. The rhythm is erratic and abstract, reminiscent of a piece of jazz. This technique was first attempted by T.S. Eliot in *Sweeney Agonistes*, an influence which Jellicoe readily accepts:

> Eliot was doing something quite different - something that had never been done before - he was linking the rhythms of his mind to the spontaneous flow of jazz music.[33]

An analysis of the beginning of Act One illustrates the essential musicality of Jellicoe's technique. Two characters enter the uncluttered arena of the stage. Their verbal exchange repeats the explosive, improvised quality of jazz. One verbal rhythm is caught up by a second speaker and sound associations link sentence to sentence. The rhythm and tone of the verbal exchange takes on greater meaning than the words spoken:

> FAK: Wotcher! Bang bang! Fireworks. Ten bob a box.
> CONE: Genuine atomic dynamite.
> FAK: Cor what a blast. Bang bang!
> CONE: Hydrogen! Plutonium! Uranium! You won't get them in no emporium.[34]

This evolves into the two-way quick-fire repartee of the Music Hall:

> CONE: Packet of sparklers: let the kiddies blind each other! Did I say four shillings? I don't ask four bob.

---

[31] Letter to the author, 9 September 1993.
[32] Ann Jellicoe, *The Knack and The Sport of My Mad Mother*, rev. edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 104.
[33] Interview with the author, 30 August 1993.
[34] *The Observer Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), p. 161.

FAK: I don't ask three and a kick -
CONE: I don't ask three shillings -
FAK: Two and a tanner!
CONE: Half a dollar! Reach the moon on a Jet Morgan sky rocket. (p. 161)

Patty, another gang member, arrives. The pace becomes more frenetic:

PATTY: Bet you bought it.
FAK: What?
PATTY: Bought it I betcher.
FAK: Wet, she says we're wet.
CONE: Nothing doing, Patty?
FAK: Slack Alice?
PATTY: Look to yourself, Faky-boy.
CONE: Look to yourself, Faky-boy.
FAK: Look to youself, Faky-boy. (pp. 162-3)

The movement reveals little *intellectually*, the spoken word tells us nothing about the characters or their situation, the verbal games fail to lead anywhere. On the other hand, the frequent changes in momentum suggest a fragmented world of vitality, anxiety and restlessness. The prevalent pattern, in which rhythm builds up to a furious pace, peaks, and then exhausts itself, communicates a propensity for violence and destructiveness:

PATTY: He's loose.
FAK: He's loony.
CONE: Quack! Quack!
PATTY: Potty!
FAK: Look! ... Boo!
DEAN: Animals -
CONE: Boo! Boo!
DEAN: - Like stampeding -
PATTY: Bim! Bam!
CONE: Bang! Bang!
FAK: Yak! Yak! Yak! Yak! (p. 163)

This mode of expression, in which turbulent rhythms cut across fleeting moments of harmony, colours the entire play.

Integrated into the shifting rhythms is an undeveloped narrative substructure, consisting of an assemblage of loosely connected episodes, centring on the exploits of a female gang-leader, Greta, and an assortment of her followers. Incidents occur, shuffled together in a rapid, often incongruous, arrangement: the gang squabbles, teases new members, plays with fireworks, dances and fights. The play ends with the unexpected birth of Greta's child, which she rejects. Jellicoe is emphatic that this fragile narrative framework is not deliberate. She interprets the narrative element not as a 'plot' in the traditional sense, but as a myth:

> The narrative which emerged naturally from my out-pourings was not expected ... In a way I was surprised to find any story at all ... I soon realised that this was not a story but a very primitive myth.[35]
>
> Although my first play, *The Sport of My Mad Mother* was built upon myth and ritual, it was written intuitively, I had no conscious idea of the means I was using.[36]

The mythological dimension represents the inevitable by-product of the sub-conscious flux:

> Myths are the bodying forth, in stories, in images, of our longing, conflicts and fears, they give shape to the deepest human urges.[37]

In this way, Jellicoe's myth serves the same purpose as Ionesco's dreams: as an unadulterated reflection of the individual's internal reality, the myth expresses universal and elemental truths.[38]

The mythological framework of the original version of *The Sport of My Mad Mother* "rests on two connected images - the impulse towards destruction and creation, embodied in Kali ... [and] the meeting of the irrational and the rational".[39] The play's brief epigraph is taken from a Hindu Hymn: "All creation is the sport of my mad mother Kali". Kali, the goddess of creation and destruction, is remodelled in the shape of Greta. Though Greta's character is ambiguous and enigmatic, the gang members depend upon her, recognising in her a source of power:

> It's like she makes something come bursting out. Everyone's got something inside and she makes it grow and grow and come bursting out. (p. 166)

From her initial appearance, Greta's aggression and imagination elevates her above the other characters. She is associated with images of untamed nature:

> I was reared in a cave by a female wallaby. Until I was seven I ran about on all fours and barked. (p. 204)

---

[35] Interview with the author, 30 August 1993.
[36] *Some Unconscious Influences in the Theatre*, p. 18.
[37] *Some Unconscious Influences in the Theatre*, p. 20.
[38] According to Ionesco, his own dream plays contain rudimentary myths: "If you're *trying* to create an archetypal character, you'll never manage it. Mythical reality can of course be analysed ... But it also comes from the uncontrollable and unconscious depths. If you are determined at all costs to demonstrate myths, instead of a mythical play, you will produce an intellectual or ideological one". Claude Bonnefoy, *Conversations with Eugene Ionesco*, trans. by Jan Dawson (London: Faber and Faber, 1970) p. 167.
[39] Letter to the author, 11 December 1992.

When one of her gang fears that her life is in danger, she responds that she is eternal and indestructible:

> Me die? My God! I run death around. I sit on death's head and kick its teeth in. I'm free. I mould. I strengthen. I dominate. I destroy. I create like fire. (p. 213)

Greta's behaviour brings out the destructive and creative aspects of her personality. In the first instance, she establishes order out of randomness: she provides a leader for the gang; she gives structure to their shapeless games; it is Greta who provides new life at the end of the play, by giving birth to a child. Paradoxically, she is also self-sufficient and cruel, capable of being vindictive towards, and of abandoning, her creation. In the second act, Greta grows bored of the gang and tries to reject them. She rejects also her own baby, referring to it as "a slime of thickness and blood ... A bestial convulsion" (p. 214). She claims, half-seriously, that her flaming red hair is coloured by the "human blood ... cold blood" of the multitudes which she has slaughtered (p. 204).

The second myth involves the meeting of the rational and the instinctual forces. Whereas Greta represents the intuitive forces, Caldaro, the outsider, is rational and intellectual. From his initial appearance, when he wanders on stage and watches the gang with incredulity, Caldaro needs to understand everything on an intellectual level:

> What is she? ... I've got to find out, I've got to - understand. (p. 199)

The play monitors the collapse of the rational force in direct proportion to its exposure to the irrational. Throughout the second act Caldaro becomes indistinct and impassive. He loses his desire to 'understand' and wants only to escape the greater, incomprehensible forces reflected in Greta. His fascination for Greta becomes a repulsion, she is:

> A back slimy gullet that sucks you down, down. Down beyond logic. Below, underneath, beyond - Oh! Uncontrollable! (p. 211)

In the final stages, as Greta leans over to kiss him, he interprets her as a wholly chaotic and negative force:

> Down! Down! You're pulling me - an abyss - a howling - howling - a pit - a raging emptiness - a waste of howling - putrefaction! ... Horror ... rottenness! (p. 215)

Upon discovering the nihilistic capacities of the subconscious, the rational mind turns away in horror: the original version ends with Caldaro asking for a gun so that he might kill himself.

In the second version of *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, revised in 1964, Jellicoe introduced a third act, which brought with it another mythological stratum. Jellicoe focuses on the relationship between Greta and one of the gang members, Cone (who, it transpires, is the child's father). Shortly before the birth of the child, Greta castigates Cone and expels him from the gang. A man's cry, off-stage, accompanies the birth:

> GRETA: What happened to Cone?
> FAK: Dead.
> GRETA: How did he die?
> FAK: He bashed himself to death with a brick. He rubbed himself out.[40]

Jellicoe attempts, in retrospect, to understand the significance of this sequence:

> This is the myth of the son rejected by his mother - cast out from the womb. Upon realising his rejection, the son castrates himself with a stone ... Greta is no longer interested with Cone and sends him away ... expulsion from the tribe is one of our deepest anxieties.[41]

In terms of Ionesco's doctrine that internal reality provides the most truthful reflection of the universal human condition, *The Sport of My Mad Mother* is a profoundly negative play. Jellicoe's theatre of the subconscious mirrors, in its movement, a ritual world which alternates between aimlessness and violence, and, in its mythological substructure, the slide towards annihilation and chaos: the original version culminates in mass rejection and death (of Caldaro and the child); the rewritten version concludes with a particularly bloody suicide and the birth of the child into a world of pain and destruction. Birth, as a symbol of redemption and hope, is reinvented in terms of suffering and cruelty. Jellicoe concludes:

> It was like giving birth to a monster ... my creation stared back at me and would not be compromised ... It is a pessimistic play (Greta's power to recreate does not reassure me) creation grows up in pain and ends swiftly in pain.[42]

---

[40] *The Knack and The Sport of My Mad Mother*, p. 168.

[41] Interview with the author, 30 August 1993. See also 'Preface to the New Version', in *The Sport of My Mad Mother* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp. 5-6 (p. 5).

[42] Interview with the author, 30 August 1993. Her second play, *The Knack* (1961), was written in partial reaction to *The Sport of My Mad Mother*: "I wanted to have more control over my material in *The Knack* ... I had written such a negative and depressing play - now I wanted to try something more positive ... I shaped the material and kept the positive ending clear". Letter to the author, 9 September 1993.

4.3 "the ambiguousness of selfhood": John Grillo's *Gentlemen I...* (1963)[43]

Jellicoe's intention to recreate in her play "the beat of the blood" and, thereby, to "touch the heart of human experience" is matched by John Grillo.[44] The structure of his first play, *Gentlemen I...*, "is not unlike a labyrinth ... I see it as a mental labyrinth, a maze of the mind".[45] The movement of the play "imitates the expectation of a man lost in the maze ... adventure turns to fear and then panic".[46] The play "takes us to the centre of the maze - to the terrible dark reality".[47]

Grillo's use of the metaphor of the labyrinth is reminiscent of Genet. Genet's dramatic technique has been described as a game of mirrors, the basic situation of each play is comparable to a man caught in a hall of mirrors, trapped by an endless and illusive progression of images: barriers of glass prevent the man from ever making contact with the others he can see around him, and the mirrors throw back only a pale and defective rendition of his true identity.[48] John Grillo's first play leads the audience deep into just such a maze of distorted reflections.[49] *Gentlemen I...* opens with Caligula, the mighty despot, surveying his demesnes. He uses with assurance the rhetoric of the tyrant:

> I dance before the world. The world adores me. On bended knees they worship me. They worship my land. See the land. Great parks, rivers, forests, vast cities. The sky, the stars are mine.[50]

The speech is disturbed by two servants, Marcellus and Angellus, who pay obeisance to their lord, washing his feet, eulogising his greatness. Owing to the frequent interruptions to the emperor's soliloquy, veneration becomes indirect ridicule and, eventually, open derision:

---

[43] John Grillo. Born in Watford, 1942. Educated at Watford Boys Grammar School, 1954-61; Trinity Hall, Cambridge, 1962-65. Professional actor working in London and in the provinces since 1965. Resident dramatist at the Castle Theatre in Farnham, 1969-70; literary associate to the Soho Theatre Club, 1971. Recipient of an Arts Council Bursary, 1965. See Berney, pp. 255-6.

[44] Letter to the author, 9 September 1993.

[45] Interview with the author, 29 August 1993.

[46] Interview with the author, 29 August 1993.

[47] Interview with the author, 29 August 1993.

[48] Esslin, pp. 200-1.

[49] Grillo admits readily to the influence of Genet on his first play. He professes a youthful enthusiasm which lead him to an "eclectic and somewhat naive bias in favour of my favourite writers". He concludes: "I had an ambition to revive the spiritual momentousness of my sources, of which there were many ... I had either seen or read some of the plays of Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter ... Genet was an influence not because I had read or seen his work but because it had been described to me in some detail by a close friend. You can pick up an influence at one remove by hearing something talked about or by reading a review in a Sunday paper. There is also a cross fertilization from other media. An influence on "Gentlemen I..." is Kafka whose short stories and novels I had read when I was at school". Letter to the author, 8 May 1993. See also Grillo's comments in Elsom, 'John Grillo', p. 217.

[50] John Grillo, *Gentlemen I...*, unpublished, p. 1.

> CALIGULA: This isn't very good. Is this all you're giving me?
> JEREMIAH: Oh what more could you desire. Such beautiful white fingers of bread ... Some people think too much of food, of their fat bellies. (p. 1)

When the lights lift, the whole image changes. The scene is not a palace, but an empty cell. Caligula is not a ruler, but a man in chains, and the two servants reveal themselves as religious acolytes, Rupert and Jeremiah.

The identity-play in Genet's works usually stops at this point. *The Maids* begins with a prolonged display of servility in which a maid dresses her mistress, though, as a result of repeated taunts, is provoked into slapping her. With the entrance of the real mistress the scenario collapses, revealing that both women are, in fact, maids, re-enacting a ritual of rebellion in the absence of their employer. In Grillo's play, the characters do not fall back onto the tenuous reassurance of a fixed identity. Jeremiah and Rupert start up a new game: they treat Caligula as a saint:

> RUPERT: The abbot will canonise you today.
> CALIGULA: Oh! I'm to be canonised am I? (p. 2)

The men are ambivalent in their attitude to the saint, who is addressed as a woman, Martha. Their initial enquiries into her health transform into threats of physical aggression:

> JEREMIAH: She needs the whip to wake her. A taste of the whip to make her well. A bamboo cane to slash her buttocks. (p. 2)

After the first scene, Grillo's hall of mirrors, his "mental labyrinth", becomes even more tortuous. The man in rags, Caligula, addresses the audience, insistent that he is an emperor. Bored of governing his empire, he has taken to playing charades, and prides himself on his skill at role-play:

> We are playing charades. We always play charades in my palace. It's one of the few things that help me pass the time ... I can be anything I want to be. (p. 3)

Caligula is concerned that the game has become so real that the boundaries between fantasy and actuality have been blurred:

> CALIGULA: You see we play charades so often that I sometimes get confused. I don't know whether people are telling the truth. (p. 7)

The behaviour of the two servants, which fluctuates between homage and aggression, confirms Caligula's fears. They ascribe to Caligula various identities, and are deaf to his entreaties to end the game:

> CALIGULA: You may drop the pretence. The game is over. It was wonderful while it lasted, but they've spoiled it now. I shall never play again. (p. 7)

Caligula's attempts to define himself are fruitless: he is trapped in a framework of relationships and identities which shift continually. When he turns to the servants in the hope of ascertaining his 'real' and permanent self, he encounters the reflected image of their own cravings. The various personas which Jeremiah and Rupert attribute to Caligula mirror their unstable perceptions, which are invariably coloured by their violent or erotic proclivities:

> RUPERT: You should not have beaten her. Such a pretty thing.
> JEREMIAH: I beat the hag with my thick whip.
> RUPERT: She's a beautiful face.
> JEREMIAH: A face like a hag. A face like a freak. Did you see her feet?
> RUPERT: They were slender feet.
> JEREMIAH: Feet like an ape. Covered with hair.
> RUPERT: They were slender feet.
> JEREMIAH: You wouldn't see anyway. Mooning at her breasts you were.
> RUPERT: Well breasts are important.
> JEREMIAH: Like two plum puddings. (p. 3)

Caligula's identity, as interpreted by those around him, is little more than a random construction, coloured by fantasy. For the two servants, he is Saint Martha, a sexual icon, sanctified by a salacious desire:

> JEREMIAH: Shall I lick your club foot, Saint Martha? Think of the whip Saint Martha. Do your breasts ache with the bruises?
> RUPERT: I love you Saint Martha.
> JEREMIAH: Shall I beat you with my bamboo cane Saint Martha? Shall I stamp on your foot?
> RUPERT: Kiss me, Saint Martha. Kiss me. (p. 11)

At the end of the play, Caligula encounters a Sorcerer, in whom he hopes to find a solution to the enigma of his identity. The Sorcerer places Caligula's dilemma on a universal scale. He relates to Caligula the parable of a dog:

> there lived a dog that thought it was a razor blade that thought it was a ship that thought it was America that thought it was Caligula. (p. 12)

According to the Sorcerer's tale, a wise man was sent for in order to cure the dog. Yet, in the end, the dog began to think it was the wise man also. From his experience with the dog, the wise man came to realise that he might actually be a dog and not a man: there was nothing to prove things either way. The Sorcerer ends his diatribe by admitting that identity is tenuous, life has no proofs and no security.[51] With this, the Sorcerer adopts Caligula's persona:

> CALIGULA: No. You can't be Caligula. I am.
> SORCERER: I am.
> CALIGULA: Why are you saying this? You're supposed to be helping me.
> SORCERER: Why are you saying this? You're supposed to be helping me. (p. 13)

In turn, Caligula takes on the characteristics of the Sorcerer and, finally, when Jeremiah and Rupert approach, seeking Saint Martha, he switches effortlessly into another role, another identity:

> CALIGULA: My name is Saint Martha. My name is Saint Martha. My name is Saint Martha. (p. 15)

Grillo explains that "[*Gentlemen I*...] takes the audience into the mind of Caligula ... a mind as unstable and deceptive as a game of charades".[52] The focus is internal, and the vicissitude of the subconscious world is reflected in the free style and, in concrete terms, in the stage itself. The stage, "dimly lit, darkness on the periphery, no props or set",[53] and divorced from physical landscapes, is reminiscent of the skull-like confines of *Endgame*.[54] There are no instructions pertaining to the entrances or exits of characters, who wait in the darkness at the back of the stage and move, with their cue, into the partially lit acting area. Whereas Caligula is trapped in the dim pool of light at centre stage, the other

---

[51] In *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* , Stoppard demonstrates the fragility of identity with an example similar to Grillo's. One of the characters explains the paradox of the Chinese philosopher who is incapable of discerning whether he is a man who dreams of being a butterfly or a butterfly who believes itself to be a man, who dreams of being a butterfly. Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), p. 44.

[52] Letter to the author, 11 February 1993.

[53] Letter to the author, 11 February 1993.

[54] Grillo's technique in this play reflects that of Proust, as described by Beckett in his early essay, 'Proust' (1931). In this essay, Beckett posits the contention that the complexity and mutability of identity demands a wholly new artistic format (that is, non-realistic) if it is to be expressed accurately, and without distortion. He argues that by eliminating "the surface" and "the offal of experience" and concentrating, instead, on internal and sub-rational realities, Proust communicates the myriad permutations of identity: "By his [Proust's] impressionism I mean his non-logical statement of phenomena in the order and exactitude of their perception, before they have been distorted into intelligibility in order to be forced into a chain of cause and effect ... The Proustian world is expressed metaphorically by the artist because it is apprehended metaphorically by the artist". Samuel Beckett, 'Proust and Three Dialogues: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit' (London: John Calder, 1965), pp. 86-8.

characters glide, like thoughts, in and out of the limited sphere of his consciousness.

For Grillo, the charade metaphor demonstrates the ephemeral and delusive nature of identity: "the ambiguousness of selfhood ... the reality within changes constantly, man has no still centre, no yard-stick to measure who he is".[55] Each apparent reality seized upon by Caligula is a chimera, which in turn is revealed as an illusion. Human identity, the bedrock from which we construct our self-image and our interpretations of the world around us, is eroded constantly by the forces of ambiguity and impermanence:

> There is nothing down there, inside of us ... roles change, patterns of behaviour change ... the only constant is the sadism ... the hardness ... which we must nurture if we are to live out our short lives with the minimum of harm.[56]

Grillo concludes:

> It hurts to live in the knowledge that there is nothing else ... Man is a bundle of sense perceptions ... he comes from the void and he must sink back in to it ... This is the truth which the dramatist has the responsibility of announcing.[57]

For N.F. Simpson and for Stanley Eveling (for whom writing is "a process of inner-archaeology"[58]) the examination of internal experience takes on a complexion very different from that of Jellicoe or Grillo. In *The Hole* Simpson consciously adopts the vocabulary of the absurd in order to allegorise the human condition. Likewise, Eveling's sophisticated allegory demonstrates the movement away from an "instinctual" or "intestinal" expression of the absurd to a more conscious realisation of the genre.

4.4 "subconscious autobiography": N.F. Simpson's *A Resounding Tinkle* (1957)[59]

The journey into the mindscape in search of metaphysical 'truths' is essential to Simpson's dramatic intention:

---

55 Letter to the author, 22 February 1993.
56 John Grillo, interview with the author, 29 August 1993.
57 John Grillo, interview with the author, 29 August 1993.
58 Stanley Eveling, letter to the author, March 18 1994.
59 Norman Frederick Simpson. Born in London, 29 January 1919. Educated at Emanuel School, London,1930-37; Birkbeck College, University of London, 1950-54. Served in the Royal Artillery, 1941-43, and the Intelligence Corps, 1943-46. Teacher at the College of St. Mark and St. John, London, 1939-41; and the City of London College, 1946-62. Literary manager at the Royal Court Theatre, 1976-78. See Berney, pp. 613-14.

> Sinking deep into the murky waters of the unconscious mind ... fishing about for those terrible and irrational things which bring us as close as is humanly possible to the dimension which some people insist on calling (even today!) 'the Godhead'.[60]

Rejecting the creed of the external and anthropomorphic God, he ascribes to the vague and confusing jumble of "pictures and images and bit-thoughts" of the subconscious "fragments of a greater meaning" or "absolute reality" which are traditionally regarded as attributes of the divine:[61]

> Man has *always* been obsessed with making sense of his life ... stop looking outward for explanations ... turn the eye inwards ... it's not easy to understand but I believe that the unconscious is the only thing we have for making sense of ourselves.[62]

Simpson began his writing career with the aim of turning his gaze inwards, of "trying to give dramatic expression to the unconscious".[63]

In order to project his internal experience on to the stage Simpson developed the technique of "subconscious autobiography":

> The 'realist' writes his autobiographical plays ... [he] recollects the events of his life from the child to the man and [he] explains why they have guided him into maturity ... This approach is questionable ... A writer should apprehend his experiences from the inside [because this is] where development takes place ... the valid autobiography is the subconscious one.[64]

The subconscious autobiography demands a form which matches and expresses the nature of internal experience:

> How can a man talk in conscious terms of that which is subconscious? ... Thoughts flash by second after second ... a garbled mess of images ... the disconnected rise and fall of moments.[65]

To ensure an accurate reproduction of his inner world, Simpson strove, in his first play, for the automatic transference of his thoughts on to the page:

---

[60] Letter to the author, 26 May 1994. René de Obaldia uses the same metaphor in relation to the technique of his absurd play, *The Jellyfish's Banquet*: "deep-sea fishing into the subconscious". *Obaldia: Plays Volume 3*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1982), p. 78.

[61] Letter to the author, 26 May 1994.

[62] Letter to the author, 26 May 1994.

[63] Letter to the author, 20 January 1994.

[64] Interview with the author, 29 May 1994.

[65] Letter to the author, 26 May 1994. Though Simpson favours the technique of spontaneous writing as a means of reflecting the reality of the inner world, he does not allow his plays to become mere shapeless outpourings. In common with Ionesco and Jellicoe, the process of spontaneous writing is followed by one of 'lucidity' in which Simpson refines and shapes his writing in order to bring out its inherent meaning. Letter to the author, 20 January 1994.

> The images [of the subconscious] have an organic appeal ... they grew out of one another inexorably. I decided to allow the images which filled my mind the liberty to grow onto the page and to have their own life ... the surreal offerings of my imagination would shape the play.[66]

> I opened the floodgates of my mind and image after image came out ... sometimes in floods and sometimes in droplets ... it was subconscious autobiography.[67]

Simpson believes that his first play represents "theatre without artifice ... as free from insincerity as I could make it" because it embodies dramatically the reality of his inner world:[68]

> I tried not to force on plots or characters where they had no right to be ... I don't think that it is right to talk about 'theme' in *Tinkle* ... any 'meaning' which it has comes naturally from the subconscious which threw it up in the first place.[69]

The arrangement of *A Resounding Tinkle* reflects the nature of the author's subconscious experience. The play is little more than a collection of short sketches or episodes, fragments of dialogue, and moments of slap-stick: "an assemblage of those things which were at the front of my brain at the time of writing ... [images of] elephants and clowns and cups of tea ... middle-class banter and Bergsonian debate".[70] Despite the disparate nature of the episodes, it is possible to summarise the main developments which constitute a disjointed 'plot': a suburban couple, Bro and Middie Paradock are visited by two comedians, Hamster and Bug. After an unannounced spoof on the National Health, the comedians discuss the nature of comedy in relation to the philosophy of Henri

---

[66] Letter to the author, 20 January 1994.
[67] Letter to the author, 26 May 1994.
[68] Letter to the author, 14 April 1994.
[69] Letter to the author, 14 April 1994. Simpson's essay, 'Making Nonsense of Nonsense', is as close as he comes to a full description of his works or a manifesto of his intentions. The essay is framed as an interview between an unidentified theatre critic and himself: though the tone is ironic and the essay veers occasionally towards the cryptic, it offers a number of interesting insights into the author's strategies. The introduction concentrates on Simpson's reliance on spontaneous writing as a means of revealing the realities of the subconscious. He describes himself as a man who "goes clanging and thundering along on his stream of consciousness like a mobile iron foundry out of control". He admits that the images and motifs which emerge from his inner world spring from a source too deep to be understood or controlled by the rational mind: "They're in and out as the whim takes them ... Half of them I've never even seen ... [I] have no control over them ... I give one or other of them a bit of a look sometimes, but on the whole they treat me as if I were the doorman". The essay develops, in Ionescan style, into an outright condemnation of the mechanisation of humanity (and, in particular, man's thought processes) consequent to 'logical' and 'scientific' thought: "science has maimed us as human beings by leaving us with only five senses to do the work of six". N.F. Simpson, 'Making Nonsense of Nonsense', *Transatlantic Review*, 21 (1966), 5-13.
[70] Interview with the author, 29 May 1994.

Bergson. An elephant is brought to the Paradock's home, which, being much too big, is exchanged for a snake which has been delivered, simultaneously, to a neighbour's house. The arrival of their son, Don, who has recently undergone a sex change, encourages the Paradocks in a lengthy argument on semantics. This series is peppered with brief appearances by the Author; a technician; two cleaners (sweeping the stage and forcing the actors to retire temporarily) and, finally, by a group of critics who sit and try to analyse the action.[71]

The play contains a number of references to the fact that, far from being a rational or intellectually sustained creation, it is the "child of an epileptic subconscious".[72] An 'Author's Note' (included in the programme of the first performance) explains that "From time to time parts of the play may seem to become detached from the main body. No attempt, well-intentioned or not, should be made from the auditorium to nudge these back into position while the play is in motion. They will eventually drop off and are quite harmless".[73] Simpson's note demonstrates that the play is little more than a collection of non-sequiturs, the product of a mind which is also "a jumble of non-sequiturs ... a shamble of vague associations ... nothing coherent".[74] In common with the mind which created it, the play is resistant to rational or "coherent" developments.

The impression of randomness and spontaneity is intensified by a series of direct addresses to the audience. The Author appears at three intervals to explain that his work is organic, growing in the direction which *it* chooses:

> How close we're getting to the original tonight is anybody's guess ... There is no desire, no intention on my part, or on the part of any of us on this side of the footlights, to impose upon you any ready-made idea of our own as to what this play ought to turn out to be.[75]

This is not mere abstruseness, but an ironic admission by Simpson, as the author, that his subconsciously autobiographical play is not constructed in accordance with the dictates of a pre-planned theme or acknowledged 'meaning'. The Author explains that as all of the cast are drunk the action presented is an impromptu creation of their own whims. Furthermore, as the play came to him in Portuguese,

---

[71] Most critics acknowledge the fact that the structure of Simpson's first play is episodic and reliant throughout on the non-sequitur. Simon Trussler, for instance, attributes the sketch-like format to the influence of television and radio comedy routines. Reviewers such as Trussler have, in general, failed to equate the structure with the intentions of subconscious autobiography: a fragmented and episodic play as the reflection of an incoherent mindscape. See Simon Trussler, 'N.F. Simpson', in *Twentieth Century Drama*, ed. by Simon Trussler (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 259-60.

[72] Letter to the author, 14 April 1994.

[73] N.F. Simpson, unpublished 'Author's Note' to the first production of *A Resounding Tinkle*, 1 December 1957.

[74] Letter to the author, 26 May 1994.

[75] *Penguin Plays: Hall; Pinter; Simpson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964), pp. 139-40.

a language of which he has no knowledge, it is impossible for him to dictate the sequence of events. The characters reiterate this idea:

> MR PARADOCK: My lines seem to be coming to me in bits. Or what seem to be bits ...
> MRS PARADOCK: What you can't remember you can make up.
> MR PARADOCK: And what I can't make up can go unsaid.
> MRS PARADOCK: No one minds with this kind of play. No one notices. (p. 120)

Bro Paradock speaks his lines as soon as they enter his head, thereby mirroring the process of the play's creation.

Realistic plays, constructed with forethought and intellectual effort, lend themselves naturally to thematic analysis. In *A Resounding Tinkle* thematic analysis is artificial and restricting. During one of his brief appearances, the Author alludes to the fact that his work has no overt meaning or thematic structure:

> I think we have all been trying as hard as can reasonably be expected not to show our exasperation - I certainly have - because we do all like, naturally, to feel we've been provided with a meaning; something we can carry round with us like an umbrella for a few days. We all feel rather lost without a meaning to seize hold of. (p. 181)

Simpson suggests that the audience abandon the fruitless quest for intellectual 'meaning', which belongs to the realm of realistic or conscious theatre, and search instead for repeated motifs which reflect some of the main preoccupations of the subconscious world:

> Critics of my work have come unstuck because they have tried to interpret particular events or bits of conversation as meaningful in themselves ... usually as specific parodies or as satire ... This is unrewarding ... look further than the things which the characters do and say ... [look] to the broader patterns.[76]

The structure of the play ("the broader patterns") provides insights into the prevailing motifs of the inner world. An impression of incongruity and inconsistency percolates through the interior landscape: the internal world is depicted, not as a logical or meaningful progression of events, but as a pastiche of images which often jar and sit together uneasily. The structure vacillates between episodes which are lengthy and static (the grandiose philosophical rhetoric of the Comedians) and those which are dynamic and violently physical (the manic cleaning and colourful vernacular of the charwomen). The transition between

---

[76] Interview with the author, 29 May 1994.

episodes is usually unexpected and invariably abrupt: a prolonged prayer is interrupted by a burst of popular music and the characters cast off their reverence to join in the song. Recurring paradoxes reinforce the impression of unpredictability and instability. Identity, for instance, is paradoxical. The opening conversation between Bro and Middie is cut short by a stranger in rags who reveals himself to be, in turn, a wandering salesman, Gladstone, and Uncle Ted. The Comedians alternate between the personae of unthinking buffoons and pedantic philosophers: they masquerade as machines, Doctors and, finally, members of the audience. Don is both male and female; a neighbour, Nora, leaves the stage to reappear as a charwoman and a theatre critic. During the first act, the Paradocks and the Comedians discuss the fact that the earth is both spherical and flat;[77] that the sun is both diurnal and nocturnal, in constant motion and perpetual stasis; that Columbus existed and did not exist; that existence itself is actual and provable, and, simultaneously, "a simple optical illusion" (p. 136).

Another motif which is repeated in various episodes relates to the mechanisation of man. During the Author's brief monologue to the audience he admits that he is a mere receptor through which a greater power communicates its intentions; the diatribe of the Comedians focuses on the idea that Bergson was, in fact, a sophisticated typewriter; the Technician reports to the audience that all of their responses are being computerised and loaded into an immense data base so that, in future performances, human beings can be dispensed with and replaced with a machine, capable of all of the necessary reactions.[78] Bro iterates his fear that his perceptions of life are artificial: "This is no longer life, it is automatism established in life and imitating it" (p. 142). His concern is justified later in the play when he is equipped with a piece of flex, plugged into the electricity socket, and metamorphoses into an adding-machine: "Tell me to do something. Go on. Feed me some data" (p. 145).

Paradox and motifs of mechanisation are the most obvious expressions of a general pattern of control loss and deterioration: man is being alienated from his environment and from himself. There is a suggestion that systems of communication are breaking down (the Author fails to understand his own work; the Comedians do not appreciate their own jokes; the critics fail to agree on a 'meaning' to the play). Images of violence (the Comedians come to blows; the critics resort to physical aggression) and of collapse (characters cease to function;

---

[77] The recurrence of motifs which suggest the paradoxical nature of life explains why Simpson chose to call his leading characters the Paradocks or 'Paradox': the Paradocks embody those contradictory and inconsistent patterns which are fundamental to existence.

[78] In later plays the central poetic image - the mechanisation of man - is reversed. In *One Way Pendulum* (1959), for instance, the protagonist spends all of his time humanising machines (teaching weighing-scales to sing).

Bro, as a machine, breaks down) contribute to the notion that the inner world is deteriorating.

The conclusion reached by the play, if any is reached at all, is that the chaos of the inner world illuminates the futility of the human condition: the Bergsonian debate is resolved when the participants accept that man is an aberrant by-product of creation; during the impromptu prayer session it is accepted that knowledge is little more than "an illusion caused by certain biochemical changes in the human brain structure during the course of human evolution" (p. 152); the critics consider that the play might reflect "The human face. In the human predicament. Contorted with grief? With pain?" (p. 186). For Simpson, the struggle for self-affirmation (reflected, in this instance, in the writing of a play) is absurd:

> You remind me of a cormorant with a beak a yard long tapping out a manifesto to the cosmos on a second-hand typewriter. I affirm letter by tipsy letter that I exist! ... Beak first it plunges like a kingfisher into the glutinous mud, sticks fast and quivers like a tuning-fork. (p. 135)

The impression of futility is reinforced by the deliberate use of absurdist references: the Comedians describe themselves in terms which would suit Estragon and Vladimir: "We are, metaphysically, the Marx Brothers" (p. 143); the critics refer to the performance as "Custard-pie comedy. Of the abstract" (p. 187); indeed, the characters define the play in which they appear as "The Comedy of Errors rewritten by Lewis Carroll to provide a part for Godot" (p. 188). Though these references are, to some extent, ironically intended, their frequent repetition suggests that Beckettian motifs were at the forefront of Simpson's mind at the time of writing. When analysed in conjunction with the images of deterioration and despair, the Beckettian motifs reveal a great deal about the mind-set of the author.

Simpson admits "I cannot simply *tell* people what the play is *about* ... because I'm not sure. I couldn't put it into words if I wanted to ... but it's as close to Wally Simpson, playwright, as you'll get".[79] Though conscious objectives may be difficult to identify, an analysis of "the broader patterns" reveals a great deal

---

[79] Interview with the author, 29 May 1994. The Author's explanation of the 'meaning' of the play, at the beginning of the second scene, is cryptic: "I think what you'd all better do is to visualise if you can a regimental sergeant-major on a kitchen chair in the middle of a bare stage with his back to you. He has a megaphone through which quite suddenly he'll begin reciting 'Jabberwocky' over and over again for three hours at top speed." (pp. 139-40). Of this image, Simpson remarks "How can 'meaning' be applied to a play such as this? The sergeant-major is perhaps as helpful as any other ... 'Jabberwocky' is, I think, a subconscious epic". Letter to the author, 14 April 1994.

about the play's preoccupations.[80] A second play, *The Hole* (1958), helps to clarify and make explicit the concerns of *A Resounding Tinkle*: Simpson returns with greater control and conscious deliberation to the process of "subconscious autobiography", and recreates in bold metaphors the process which underpins his first work. *The Hole* lays bare the mechanics of the internalisation process and comments openly on the absurdity of the human condition.

Simpson explains that one reason for *The Hole* "was to answer the critics ... [though] I was entertained by their fanciful interpretations, the time was ripe to supply a guiding hand".[81] In *The Hole*, Simpson objectifies and externalises those processes which were fundamental to the creation of the first play. In *A Resounding Tinkle* Simpson looked into the darkness of his subconscious and recreated, in dramatic form, what he saw. In *The Hole* the Visionary peers into the darkness of a hole in the road and his speeches monitor what his imagination perceives: the hole becomes a symbol for the subconscious mindscape. In effect, then, *The Hole* repeats the process of *A Resounding Tinkle*, but the process is distanced from the author and placed within a framework which is almost allegorical.

4.5 Absurdism as a mirror to the mind: *The Hole* (1958)

The essentially static situation in *The Hole* renders comparison with Beckett unavoidable. The entire plot dynamic centres on a hole in the road which is approached, at various intervals, by a collection of by-passers. Each of these sees reflected inside the hole the movements of his own subconscious. The hole becomes a blank screen onto which the characters project the shifting web of their fantasies and desires. The play evolves into a series of inter-cutting monologues, a pastiche of internal voices, each of which reveals in vivid linguistic images the internal reality which lies beneath the rational mind.

---

[80] The 'Author's Note' reinforces much that is suggested by the images and motifs of the play. Though Simpson does not ascribe a 'meaning' to his work, the 'Note' alludes in ironic terms to the futility and purposelessness of the human condition: "It has been said that, cataclysms apart, the earth will be able to support life for another twelve hundred million years. These are going to have to be got through, preferably without fuss, and it is important to address ourselves to ways and means by which to keep ourselves occupied for so long a time. It is less difficult than at first sight it might appear, however, if we reflect on the activities open to us. One will be able to poke things, for example. One will be able to pick them up and put them down. One will be able to distinguish between one thing and another, or between one group of things and another larger, or smaller, group ... And there are trigonometry, eating, travel, counterespionage ... there are logs to be chopped, people to be snubbed, walls to be whitewashed and lavatory cleanser to be sprinkled". N.F. Simpson, 'Author's Note' to *A Resounding Tinkle*. Simpson refers to this 'Author's Note' and, by inference, the play, as "an essay in Camus-style absurdism". Letter to the author, 17 March 1994.

[81] Letter to the author, 11 October 1993.

The "Visionary" sits beside a hole in the road, dedicated to his private vision of what he sees down the hole. He witnesses a congregation of people, awaiting the unveiling of a magnificent cathedral window:

> VISIONARY: ... the solemn unveiling of the great window in the south transept whose quote or rather misquote many-coloured glass will God willing in all probability stain the white radiance of eternity unquote to the everlasting glory of God.[82]

Such is his passion for his vision that, at one time, he had hoped that others would share what he saw:

> My ambition once was to have a queue stretching away from me in every possible direction known to the compass. (p. 2)

The Visionary retains his vision throughout the play. He does not, after his initial speeches to Endo, communicate with any of the other characters. He sits, unaffected by events, rapt in his private fantasy.

At various stages, the Visionary is joined by others. Based on William Sheldon's comprehensive classification of physiological and psychological types, the names of the characters (Endo, Soma, Cerebro, Mrs Ecto, Mrs Meso) suggests that they represent, in microcosm, the whole of humanity.[83] Each of the characters is caught in the vision: though, unlike the Visionary, their vision is neither consistent nor static. The rapid changes in what the spectators see reflect a gradual descent into the subconscious, a peeling away of psychological layers until they arrive at the core of their being.

Initially, as the characters stare down the hole, their visions are innocuous. They envisage a civil and fairly orderly world of indoor sports: 'Happy Families', 'Snap', dominoes:

> SOMA: He's on him with Mr Rake the Gardener. It never fails.
> ENDO: Snap! (p. 6)

---

[82] N.F. Simpson, *The Hole* (London: Samuel French, 1958), p. 3.

[83] Sheldon classifies three predominant physiological types: the endomorph, the mesomorph and the ectomorph. With each physical type is closely correlated a temperamental pattern: the viscerotonic, the somatotonic and the cerebrotonic. The endomorphic body type, for instance, is usually fat and rounded. The viscerotonic temperament which is associated with the endomorphic constitution has a multitude of attributes: a love of food, comfort, luxury and ceremony; fear of solitude, the craving for affection, and an indulgence in nostalgia. Simpson's characters are universalised and non-particular as they each represent a fundamental expression of the human constitution. See Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946), pp. 168-76.

The vision begins to deteriorate after the innocence and good humour of these childhood games. The card games make way for more active sports: football, golf, tennis:

> ALL: Eighteen all.
> (*There is a pause*)
> Eighteen nineteen. Eighteen twenty. Nineteen twenty. Twenty all.
> (*There is a pause*)
> One love - love two - game. (p. 10)

It is revealing that the only character who attempts to resist looking down the hole is Cerebro. From time to time he turns away, refusing to co-operate or doubting what is seen:

> VISIONARY: We shall see something soon.
> CEREBRO: No-one else is going to see it. And you yourself don't see it, either, except in your imagination. It bears no relationship to reality. (p. 27)

As the cerebral or 'intellectual' side of man, Cerebro is reluctant to indulge those subconscious powers which render the conscious mind superfluous. Despite his complaints, however, Cerebro does not have the determination to resist and is persuaded to capitulate.

After the outdoor sports the fantasies begin to take on a more ominous quality, and a shared vision of imprisonment is given precedence. A man is incarcerated, without food or attention, in a tiny cell:

> CEREBRO: He's in a cell ...
> SOMA: He's being punished.
> ENDO: He's tapping on the pipes. (p. 23)

The vision of confinement unleashes a deluge of hate and hypocrisy from those watching. For them, the very fact of imprisonment is indicative of guilt:

> SOMA: He has done wrong, and he has chosen to do it illegally.
> CEREBRO: It is the duty of every one of us to avoid those crimes we know to have been blacklisted.
> SOMA: To act otherwise is evil. (p. 23)

Vilification leads to a rhapsody of cruelty as each of the characters moves, unwittingly, into a darker area of his subconscious. They call out for severe punishments for the criminal who they have created, accused and judged:

> MRS ECTO: Burn him! Burn him at the stake!
> ENDO: Bring back the rack!
> SOMA: The rope!
> ENDO: The lash!

SOMA: The cat!
CEREBRO: The club!
MRS ECTO: Bring back the harpoon! (p. 25)

The sinister creations of the collective subconscious become increasingly fantastic. The characters next invent a ritual of human sacrifice:

ENDO: It's a bloodstained knife!
CEREBRO: It's ritual murder!
SOMA: It's human sacrifice! (p. 29)

The frenzy culminates in images of rampage and chaos. Initially, the destruction is caused by hordes of 'others':

CEREBRO: It's a bestial ritual.
ENDO: They're burning widows ...
CEREBRO: They're Ku Klux Klan. (pp. 31-2)

As if to emphasise that the havoc is *their* creation, Simpson shows his characters becoming active participants in the destruction:

CEREBRO: (*marching C and facing Endo*) To the ramparts.
ENDO: To the barricades ...
TOGETHER: (*stamping and turning to face front*) Into battle!
(p. 32)

The increasing brutality of these visions constitutes an effective comment on the human condition: "The unconscious world is in turmoil ... there are no grounds for optimism".[84] Simpson recognises in the "turmoil" of the inner vistas a reflection of a wider devastation:

> Destructiveness is congenital ... it is part of the cosmic order of things ... this is what the characters witness down "the hole" of the subconscious.[85]

Simpson's admission that his play does not provide "grounds for optimism" is revealing, and helps to make sense of the Visionary. The Visionary would appear to be the most positive of the characters: his subconscious world seems to be radiant as he adheres unflinchingly to his fantasy of the magnificent window. However, Simpson is sceptical in his treatment of the Visionary, as we can tell from the wording of the play's stage-directions:

There is an air of patient single-mindedness about him. (p. 1)

---

[84] Letter to the author, 11 October 1993.
[85] Letter to the author, 11 October 1993.

> *He deserves, for his pertinacity, to be referred to as the* VISIONARY. (p. 1)

The Visionary, pertinacious and single-minded, remains untouched by the horror unleashed in those around him. His dogmatic absorption in a single and unchanging vision suggests that he is unreceptive and unimaginative:

> VISIONARY: (*in a self-absorbed undertone*) ... Whose quote or rather misquote many-coloured glass will God willing in all probability stain the white radiance of eternity unquote ... (pp. 40-1)

The inner world of the peripheral characters is broken through violence and destructiveness: the inner world of the Visionary is empty.

The transition from *A Resounding Tinkle* to *The Hole* may be defined as the movement from an instinctual to an intellectual absurdism. *A Resounding Tinkle* lays bare the contents of the mind of the author, and depicts an inner world in the process of decay. In *The Hole*, Simpson approaches his material with greater control and deliberation: he removes the directly autobiographical element and concentrates on the subconscious world of his characters. Even though the approach of Simpson's two plays differs slightly, the results are identical: the rhythms of despair which inform the inner world of the author in *A Resounding Tinkle* are universalised in *The Hole*, in which destructiveness and fear are revealed in humanity's collective subconscious.

4.6 "a projection of the prowling needs inside":[86] Stanley Eveling's *An Unspeakable Crime* (1963)

Like Simpson, Stanley Eveling communicates his vision of man's inner world in allegorical form. Eveling's first play, *An Unspeakable Crime* (1963), examines, on the one hand, the forces which drive man to "dispel the inhuman and illusory world and live on the inside", and, on the other hand, "explores the horror of the internal experience".[87]

The Prisoner, the central character, is trapped in an external world which is insufficient. The limitations of the external are reflected in the grotesque figures which the Prisoner encounters: Mr Grahame, his best friend, is a hopeless conformist, reiterating the clichés of the society which has created him. Three judges walk past, monstrous representatives of an obscure social organism, their language an empty pastiche of legal jargon: "Prima facie the case is sui generis.

---

[86] Stanley Eveling, *An Unspeakable Crime*, unpublished, p. 16.
[87] Stanley Eveling, letter to the author, March 18 1994.

Felo de se is culpable. That is quite clear." (p. 27). This world is cut-off from the Prisoner, its occupants are fleeting and spectral, its language is esoteric and ultimately incomprehensible. Sensitive to his isolation from the 'real', the Prisoner chooses to withdraw into his internal dimensions, with which his relationship is neither transient nor ephemeral. His monologues recreate his movement inwards:

> I'm away in red and blue images. Somewhere is concocting these images, hot red and cold blue, ice and fire, water and sun, tension and ease (p. 15)

> Lying, looking at the ceiling I amused myself by painting the ceiling with numbers. Ordinals, cardinals, reals, rationals, irrationals ... squads of numbers, a court of collaborating numbers, moving and joining and summating together ... they changed to strange robes and dresses, they were tripped and equated ... (p. 16)

When the Prisoner is approached by guards and taken away for "an unspeakable crime" and "crimes against the law" (p. 10), it is obvious that his transgression lay in his rejection of, and inharmonious relationship with, the external. As in Kafka's *The Trial*, representatives of an unapproachable 'other' interrogate the innocent Prisoner. The Interrogator realises, from the commencement of the trial, that their judgements cannot affect one who will not adhere to the demands of the outer world:

> he has eyes that see through the walls of his prison. He has eyes to see through the bandages of the law. He has eyes to see in the dark and through the dark and he has eyes to ignore the light and beyond the light. The foundations shake, the bones of the earth melt, the real isn't real ... (p. 67)

He regards it his duty to coax the Prisoner into the realms of the concrete, so that they may have power over him: "you're living in a nightmare ... Come out of the dark" (p. 24).

During his trial the Prisoner excludes the external world and submerges himself in his dream reality. He is detached from the questions aimed at him, relating in detail the vivid images of his subconscious. The internal is not, however, a halcyon world. The Prisoner's monologues, which describe being terrorised by mythical wild beasts and obscene forces, suggest a living hell:

> It's not like a cathedral town inside me ... No. Not. It's more like a room full of white ghosts, all humming and hawing, all sighing and thinking and talking, all hunched around the past trying to keep warm, trying to get back. My head ... is haunted. My head ... is hell. It's a fire, heating my imagination, causing the dead to rise

> and white-hot words to flow. I would like to escape from the nightmare of myself. (p. 38)

The prevalent images reflected in the inscape of the Prisoner are those of isolation:

> Dread. Falling. From the top to the bottom, into the universe, for ever, falling, crying through all time. (p. 40)

and of meaninglessness:

> cries out in the hollow and bottom of space, all is nothing, all is nothing. (p. 67)

The dilemma faced by the Prisoner, then, is whether to accept an external world which is painful and strange, or to inhabit a nightmarish and isolating internal world to which he rightfully belongs. The Prisoner chooses the abstract realms: "I deny your reality ... I shut the door of my mind" (p. 68). Though the inscape might be terrifying, the Prisoner accepts it as his only true reality. The play concludes on a profoundly absurd image: the characters and all of the remnants of the external world fade into darkness, leaving the Prisoner in the absolute isolation of his mind; this is not freedom but a self-induced incarceration:

> Alone. Silence. What sound I make is my own. My own. I am, you might say, no, *I* might say, in a manner of speaking, free. I AM FREE. Ha, ha. Can I hold on? Time ticks in my bones. I will die. Die, die, die ... Where is everybody? Where has everybody gone? (pp. 73-4)

The inner world, as depicted in this play, adheres closely to absurd prototypes: it is a mirror to the futility and anxiety of the human condition. Though the internal vistas express, more so than the external world, a comprehensive reality, this reality is a disturbing and nihilistic one.

An Unspeakable Crime presents, in distilled form, the dramatic model used by all four of the dramatists discussed in this chapter. The dominant motifs of the French absurd are prevalent: the rejection of the external and social dimensions of life;[88] the devaluation of conventional linguistic techniques; the use of a fragmented structure and of a shifting framework of poetic images to present

---

[88] Eveling explains that the intention of his play was to explore "relationships which are not so much between one person and another or a human being and his social environment as between the isolated individual and the world stripped of social intention ... what might be called the metaphysical rather than the social or personal states of a particular human being". See John Spurling, 'Stanley Eveling', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson (London: St James Press, 1973), pp. 234-6 (p. 235).

the prevailing themes or ideas of the play.[89] It is, however, in thematic terms that the absurd leaning of these writers is most pronounced. Eveling's play is a metaphysical odyssey, a journey into the internal world which maps out the topography of the human condition. The metaphor of the inner journey unites *An Unspeakable Crime* with *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, *Gentlemen I...* and *The Hole*. Though the journeys takes on their own distinct form, the ultimate destination is, in each case, the same: a personalised vision of a universal chaos. Like Jean in *Hunger and Thirst*, the four playwrights examined here encounter, at the end point of their internal quest, "the gloomy plains of nightmare reality".[90]

---

[89] Eveling writes that "the style must actualise the idea presented therein". Stanley Eveling, letter to the author, 18 March 1994.

[90] Eugene Ionesco, *Plays: Volume Seven*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968), p. 49.

CHAPTER V

BARRY BERMANGE AND THE VOICES OF CHAOS

The plays of Barry Bermange and James Saunders, discussed in the following chapters, present an interesting contrast to the works of the other absurdists analysed in this thesis. Bermange and Saunders are the only playwrights of the pre-1964 generation who have remained *consistently* absurd. All of their plays, including those written in the 1970s, demonstrate a relentless quest for dramatic forms with which to examine their vision of the absurdity of life. This chapter concentrates on the early work of Barry Bermange whose first four plays represent a far-reaching attempt at developing the action on a subconscious level and at creating dramatic images with which to present the disorder and the pain which inform the human condition.[1]

In each of his plays Bermange examines the processes through which the chaos which is embedded within, and fundamental to, the human psyche, corrodes and eventually usurps a fragile external reality. His technique is typified in the short television piece, *Invasion.* External reality is reflected in the polite interactions and civil chatter of a group of guests at a dinner party; internal reality is symbolised by a television screen which, partially visible from the dining room, recreates "the atmosphere of a dream" in its continuous sequence of images of violence and slaughter.[2] At intervals, each of the guests becomes aware of the pictures on the screen and is involved in the action. By the end of the play the dining room has transformed into a place of carnage, and the guests lie mutilated and dead. Colour has been drained from the room and replaced with the grainy, grey quality of the television images. The volatile and destructive dream reality of the screen has usurped the tenuous and artificial external reality of the party.[3]

External reality has no place in Bermange's work and the 'real' world is presented as illusive. Invariably, the apparently concrete set proves to be unstable: physical landscapes collapse in on themselves, mutate, decrease in size,

---

[1] Barry Bermange was born in London on 7 November 1933. Educated at an art school in Essex, 1947-52. National service, 1952-54. Assistant designer at the Perth Repertory Company, 1955; actor and assistant stage manager at the Swansea Repertory Company, 1956. Recipient of an Arts Council bursary, 1964; Ohio State University Award, 1967; German Critics Award, 1968; Karl Sczuka Prize (Germany), 1981, 1987. See *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by K.A. Berney, 5th edn (London: St. James Press, 1993), p. 52.

[2] Barry Bermange, *No Quarter and The Interview* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 135.

[3] An overview of this play is provided in Donald McWhinnie, 'Introduction', in *No Quarter and The Interview*, pp. 7-9.

alienate and restrict their human occupants.[4] Each of his plays, then, becomes a metaphor for the internal experience, and the changes presented therein reflect the capriciousness and unpredictability of internal rhythms. The mind-set-chaos nexus is fundamental to the plays of Ionesco and Beckett and, like these dramatists, Bermange has developed a consistent symbolism with which to explore it.

5.1 "The world closes before me":[5] *Nathan and Tabileth* (1962) and *No Quarter* (1962)

The structure of Bermange's plays is based on one or the other of two patterns, and occasionally on both. The first is enclosure. *No Quarter* (1962), *The Mortification* (1964) and *Oldenberg* (1967) progress from one area of the stage to another, each area significantly smaller, darker and more restricted than the last. At the end of each of these plays, the characters are trapped in a vacuum, as they are in Beckett's *Not I* or Ionesco's *The New Tenant*, before being extinguished completely. The second pattern favoured by Bermange is that of circularity. In *The Cloud* (1964) and *Scenes from Family Life* (1969), patterns of behaviour and dialogue are repeated, as they are in *Waiting for Godot* and *The Bald Prima Donna*, reflecting the cycles of sterility and futility which exemplify the human condition. At the end of all four of these plays, the cycle is completed and repeated with the end reiterating the beginning.[6] In *Nathan and Tabileth* (1962) the characters are doubly trapped as the larger dramatic structure which contains them combines both patterns of enclosure and circularity.

In seven short scenes, which more closely resemble fragments than true scenes, the play takes us through a day in the life of two lonely and fearful old people, Nathan and his wife, Tabileth. Each of these fragments might be regarded as an isolated entity in itself, not necessarily sharing a sequential or chronological relationship with the others. Scene one begins in profound darkness. Initially deprived of visual stimulus, the audience relies on Nathan's voice to explain his situation:

---

[4] Irving Wardle, 'Introduction', in *New English Dramatists* 12 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 7-21 (pp. 20-1).

[5] Barry Bermange, *Nathan and Tabileth and Oldenberg* (London: Methuen, 1967), p. 8.

[6] The cyclical pattern of *Scenes from Family Life* is particularly pronounced. The play commences with Walter visiting his ex-wife, Marie, and her new husband, Eric. Walter reminisces about the times when Eric would call on himself and Marie, under similar circumstances. He comments, "it [time] seems to move in circles, retracing itself, picking up threads". The play concludes with Walter and Marie reunited and issuing an invitation to Eric to visit them. The implication is strongly felt that this pattern of one man replacing another, only to be supplanted in turn, will continue forever. The quotation used here is taken from the original, unpublished, edition of the play (p. 24).

> I am in a park. With my wife ... It is evening and there are people moving quietly through the trees. In the air hangs the smell of winter. And sometimes there is something like music that comes to me.[7]

This account, though simple and economical, is filled with images of noise and activity. The lights raise fractionally, presenting a world which is in stark and telling contrast to Nathan's perceptions. There is no noise and no visual distraction, merely two old people staring blankly out to the audience, isolated from their environment by the gathering darkness.

There is barely any movement or development within the scene. Action takes the form of four separate and disconnected tableaux. The first is the image of the old people sitting quietly, Nathan reporting what he sees. The second is of Tabileth lamely throwing scraps of bread to the birds, relating her feelings towards Nathan as he looks on impassively. In the third tableau Tabileth's hands move towards Nathan's coat and fumble with his buttons. Finally, the old people rise and walk steadily into the darkness. In each of these episodes the central activity is dwelt upon with such concentration that it preoccupies all of our attention, becoming disproportionate to, and estranged from, its context. When Tabileth fastens Nathan's coat, for instance, her white hands stand out against the surrounding blackness, their twitching motion becomes grotesque in the absolute stillness. The episode is magnified further by Nathan's intricate and dispassionate commentary:

> I feel her upon me: smooth fingers out of nowhere, Tabileth's fingers, straightening my hat, tightening my scarf, brushing from my lapels the remains of our sandwich lunch. (p. 8)

In this manner, each tableau becomes a limited series of disproportionately monitored events.[8] The 'real' situation from which they emerge fades into relative insignificance; dramatic action evolves as a disconnected string of over-amplified incidents. The dramatic context loses its meaning and the audience is left with an after-image of unrelated pockets of experience.

The four tableaux which constitute this scene are made distinct from one another by a momentary decrease in the lighting. Nathan is sensitive to the diminishing light, concluding each tableau with a brief reference to the accumulating darkness: "The world closes before me. Darkness comes" (p. 8). At

---

[7] *Nathan and Tabileth and Oldenberg*, p. 7.

[8] John Elsom writes "Like Marguerite Duras, he sometimes presents an apparently small incident observed in precise detail: and separates it from all the surrounding life until it exists in a significant isolation". See John Elsom, 'Barry Bermange', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, 4th edn, ed. by D. L. Kirkpatrick (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 50-2 (p. 51).

the end of the scene, when the two characters begin their slow progress off stage, the light has faded entirely. We are told that "they recede" and that "the image fades" (p. 9). As they leave the park, Nathan glances back. Darkness has swallowed the scene. He comments upon this ironically:

> Everything vanishes behind us. There is no sign of our ever having been. (p. 9)

Within this scene enclosure operates on at least two levels simultaneously. In the first instance, the separation of the action into tableaux and the structuring of each tableau into a staccato series of overly-magnified events, serves to divorce the characters from a fluid or meaningful context. Experience is interpreted as an unrelated collection of self-enclosed moments. Darkness intensifies the enclosure. The life of the protagonists is shrouded with the darkness, the nothingness, which divorces them from a wider context of inter-relationships and logical connections and which swallows up all of their perceptions: as Nathan comments, the darkness has swept away any traces of their existence.

A broader pattern of enclosure operates *throughout* the play. At the beginning of each scene a weak light penetrates the black, barely illuminating the stage. This light steadily diminishes throughout, so that at the end of the scene there is total darkness. The light in scene one is significantly brighter than in scene two, which, in turn, is brighter than scene three. Owing to this gradual decrease in light, scene seven is played in a vague, spectral luminescence. The over-all impression is of a gradual deterioration into obscurity. The motifs of light and dark are returned to continually, emphasising the symbolic significance of the increasing gloom. The darkness of scene one is penetrated by the fading rays of the setting sun. The only light in scene two is created by an ancient light bulb. Scene four is lit by a dwindling fire, and a minute pool of candle light provides the only recourse against the dark in the sixth and final scenes. The characters are conscious of the intensification of the darkness and refer endlessly to the need for light. As light is not forthcoming, they reluctantly undergo their rights of passage through various gradations of darkness. In the living room:

> NATHAN: The big green door is opening. There is a square of darkness ... Tabileth takes me through the darkness. (p. 10)

In the dining room: "Darkness comes" (p. 14); in the hallway: "Tabileth's voice comes to me out of the darkness" (p. 26). Every moment of Nathan's life is prefaced by a slight decrease in precious light. At the end of each scene, the stage directions tell us that "the image fades". Darkness has closed in, sealing the

characters in a vacuum. The minimalism of the final stage image is Bermange's concluding statement of hopelessness. There is no set, no light, no noise:

> NATHAN: ... the world closes before me.
> (*Pause*)
> Darkness comes.
> (*Pause*)
> At least ... I think it does.
> (*Silence. The image fades.*) (p. 32)

Light cannot keep on decreasing forever: at the end of the play, Nathan has finally reached that point when there is continual darkness.

Accumulating darkness co-exists with physical and spatial restriction to enhance the impression of enclosure. Each successive scene is set in a place smaller and more confined than the last: park, garden, living room, dining room, hallway, bedroom. Moreover, intricate patterns of spatial enclosure operate *within* each restricted area. In the park, Nathan is fastened in, and almost enshrouded by, his clothes: "Gradually, expertly, I am sealed inside" (p. 8). When arriving in the living room, he moves directly to the large arm-chair in which he is protected from the room; in the bedroom, he conceals himself with the sheets of his narrow bed.[9]

Nathan's attitude to the enclosure is ambiguous. Though he hates the encroaching darkness and the increasing spatial limitation of his environment, he derives from it a feeling of safety. In scene two he relaxes upon entering his "little dark room". He had been uncomfortable and panicky in the park, fearful of the pigeons:

> NATHAN: How I *hate* that park.
> TABILETH: He feels free now.
> NATHAN: Free to move about, to stretch myself. (p. 11)

Hamm might demand that Clov look from the window of their confines and report what he sees, yet he is loath to leave the security and predictability of his limited environment. Murphy might venture into the outside world but he is happiest when tied to his rocking chair and blinded by scarves, or when alone in a padded cell at the Magdalen Mercy Seat. Nathan behaves in a similar fashion. His senses numbed, enclosure has become important to him: a necessary divorce from the randomness of experience and the pain of belonging.

The structure of *Nathan and Tabileth* might be visualised as a set of Chinese boxes, a series of enclosures which collapse inwards to form smaller

---

[9] Motifs of enclosure inform many of Beckett's plays. In *All That Fall*, for example, Maddy Rooney complains of being incarcerated within her corset; in Mr Slocum's car; in her small bed.

enclosures. Juxtaposed to this is the less overt pattern of circularity. Apparently innocuous extracts of dialogue and casual gestures are repeated, word-for-word and motion-for-motion, throughout the play. The cyclical movement is most apparent in the pivotal scene four. Nathan and Tabileth have eventually settled in their living room when there is an unexpected knock at the door. A young man, Bernie, claiming to be their grandson, enters the room. Though the two old people have no recollection of him (or of anything else for that matter), his behaviour is apparently relaxed and normal. In Tabileth's absence, Bernie speaks freely to Nathan about their supposed relatives. The dialogue, free of reported thoughts and consisting of straight-forward conversation, provides what appears to be a temporary diversion into realism:

> BERNIE: Oh by the way, Aunty Mary said to give her regards.
> NATHAN: Who?
> BERNIE: I saw her the other day.
> NATHAN: Saw who?
> BERNIE: I told her I might drop in to see you and she said to give you her regards. (p. 20)

Despite his initial reluctance, Nathan is soon caught in the flow of conversation, and the two chat like old friends:

> BERNIE: Shame about Uncle Norman, wasn't it?
> NATHAN: Yes ... a terrible business ...
> BERNIE: He didn't deserve that, did he?
> NATHAN: No ... not Norman ... he didn't deserve that ... (p. 21)

The momentary digression into normal discourse proves illusory. When Nathan subsequently leaves the room, Bernie repeats the entire conversation, verbatim, to Tabileth. Ironically, each of her responses is exactly the same as Nathan's. When Nathan returns, the conversation takes place a third time, word-for-word; neither husband nor wife makes any comment to signify that any of it has been heard before. Patterned repetition of this type pervades the play. Events earlier in the action are mirrored in those of the concluding stages: whenever Nathan enters a room he ritualistically winds a clock; in most scenes he anticipates Tabileth's entrance by sniffing the air; extracts of dialogue from scenes one and two reappear in scenes six and seven. This overt sequencing of chunks of dialogue shatters the veneer of realism and heightens the impression of discordancy.

Structure becomes a dramatic realisation of the mental experience of the characters. Disconnected movement reflects the fragmentation of experience, the enclosed and staccato sequencing approximates the distorted perceptions of the dying mind. There are no stable landscapes in the play, no clearly defined

settings or external and extraneous objects. We know that we are in the park or the bedroom because Nathan tells us so. A shifting and temporary environment is created by his few perfunctory statements. Setting is a verbal construct and, as such, the product of Nathan's mind: the ephemeral locations, the gloom from which the characters appear and into which they disappear, become a dramatic presentation of their confused and obfuscated interior worlds.

An analysis of one of the play's central motifs, memory loss, illustrates the interior focus. For Bermange memory loss is a succinct and powerful metaphor for the human condition. Man defines himself and his place within the world through his memory. Memory furnishes him with a coherent sense of history and continuity and, as well as being the crux of his self-identity, provides a reason for his present situation.[10] For Bermange's characters, who have no memory, life is not a continuous and stabilising flow of connected and inter-related experiences, but a dissonant juxtaposition of isolated and fragmented events. Every moment of their lives is hermetically sealed, floating in the amorphous haze of memory, denied relevance to, or contact with, other moments and experiences. Scene one may be interpreted as a mosaic of memory lapses. On at least six occasions Nathan directly contradicts himself or negates, with a question, the assurance of a previous statement. Significantly, each of the memory lapses relates to a different aspect of temporal experience. In the first instance, past time is questioned: Nathan informs us that he has just walked to the park with his wife and immediately after he admits that he is not at all certain that this is true. Present time is also queried. Nathan states clearly that he is with his wife: suddenly, he is uncomfortable with the woman at his side, he is does not think that they are acquainted. Future time is also obscured: though Nathan asserts that it is approaching closing time, that he will soon be returning home, we are told that it may not be closing time, that they might stay. Nathan's amnesia is so pervasive that, as a result of it, he loses a sense of his own physical being. Having told us that he is rising (indeed, we witness him doing so) he admits, having stood up, that he is unsure whether he has risen or not. He resents his wife's touching him, yet forgets if his body has registered his displeasure: "I stiffen. At least I think I do" (p. 7).

The pattern of memory loss and self-contradiction is repeated in every scene. At each stage of the play the events of the previous scene are lost entirely:

---

[10] Beckett's characters have a memory which is either inherently confused (Hamm and Clov) or is extremely limited (Estragon and Vladimir); they are absurd in that, having no memory with which to make sense of their past or the present situations, they become out of harmony with their environments. This is true also with Ionesco's characters. See Richard N. Coe, *Ionesco: A Study of his Plays*, rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1971), pp. 54-8.

> When did we leave the park, was it today? I don't remember leaving ... (p. 14)

The severity of the memory-loss is emphasised in scene seven when Nathan, watching his wife in that most intimate moment of undressing, is not even sure that she is his own wife:

> From my pillow I watch Tabileth undressing. Who is she? (p. 27)

Nathan's life becomes a series of non-sequiturs. As such, he must reinvent his identity, his image of the world and his place within it, with every new perception. The play's structure, as a collection of enclosed moments, of repeated events and gestures, becomes a direct re-enactment of Nathan's mental processes: it is a metaphor for the halting rhythm of memory.

The internal vista recreated in the structure is governed by a mood of increasing fear: the sensations of menace, muted and enigmatic, and of confusion, towards a world which has ceased to make sense, pervade the play. Bermange's plays have been compared with those of Marguerite Duras and Harold Pinter.[11] This comparison is very revealing for, as Harold Hobson argues, Duras is the French dramatist whose works most closely resemble those of Pinter.[12] According to Hobson, what connects Pinter and Duras is the delicacy of nuance with which they communicate the very real patterns of menace and anxiety which underpin man's relationship to the world around him. As in Pinter's plays, Bermange's protagonists fear anything that is external to themselves: every object and every person is a potential threat and is treated with suspicion and with an often barely disguised hostility. The apparently ordinary portrayal of an old couple's walk from a park to their home, and then to bed, generates a massive amount of terror. The pigeons in the park are, for Nathan, a source of profound anxiety:

> Look at her feeding those pigeons. How they frighten me. Look at her slipping bread into their beaks. I hide my face with my fingers. (p. 7)

In the precarious safety of his home, staring at the fire, the flames transform into images of birds which again assail Nathan's consciousness and send him into paroxysms of panic:

---

[11] John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 320.
[12] Harold Hobson, *Theatre in Britain: A Personal View* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1984), pp. 197-9.

> I am staring at the fire now. I am blinking and counting the flames ... Park ... *birds*! I can't stand the thought of birds, so I think them into the fire and burn them all away! (p. 14)

Commonplace objects acquire a new and threatening identity. In the final scene, Nathan comments on the white net curtains surrounding the bedroom window: they take on the properties of clouds which, floating towards him, fill him with dread and impel him to scream into the darkness. Another moment of panic follows quickly when a dressing-table mirror, and its three-fold reflection of Tabileth, acquires monstrous dimensions.[13] What becomes Nathan's greatest threat, mutating more than any other, is Tabileth herself.[14] Throughout the play she acquires a series of identities, each one strange and unsettling to her husband. She becomes (in Nathan's perceptions) a Lamia-like figure, wife, stranger, seductress, monster. In the final scene, as she moves towards the bed, potentially for the play's first moment of contact, Nathan interprets her behaviour as predatory:

> Who is she? Do I know her? Why is she in the room with me? ... Now there are three Tabileths in the mirror ... weren't there three before? The faces are frowning at me ... she is near me ... the coverlet is parting ... she is climbing into bed with me! (p. 28)

In scene four, during the exchange with Bernie, the patterns of fear are heavily reminiscent of Pinter's early work. The knock at the door is greeted with the rituals of panic which Pinter perfected in *The Room* and *The Birthday Party*. The simple act of knocking evolves into an expression of aggression and a threat of invasion.[15] Like Rose or Stanley, the two old people are disorientated and distressed:

> TABILETH: Was that a knock?
> NATHAN: A knock at the door ...
> TABILETH: Was that a knock at the door ...?
> NATHAN: Tabby ...
> TABILETH: A knock ...?
> NATHAN: I think so. Yes. At the door.
> TABILETH: Who can it be? (p. 15)

---

[13] Irving Wardle is sensitive to this aspect of Bermange's work, writing, "His dialogue has a hallucinatory power to dwell on commonplace objects until they become strange and hostile". Wardle, p. 20.

[14] This idea of the 'insider' or 'ally' turning into a predator is delineated clearly in *Scenes from Family Life*. A typically Pinteresque situation is established, highly reminiscent of *The Basement* (1967), in which two men undergo a series of complex rituals in their pursuit of the woman. Though Walter, the outsider, is initially defined as the aggressor, and a threat to Eric's territory, a subtler and more sinister hostility (and that which eventually defeats Eric) comes from within, from Marie.

[15] See Martin Esslin, *Pinter: A Study of his Plays*, rev. edn (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978), pp. 35-6.

Rhythms of evasion and procrastination govern the conversation between Nathan and Bernie. One is conscious of an underlying battle for territory between the two men, the desperate plight of the prey (Nathan) to protect himself from the threat of the predator/outsider (Bernie).[16] Bernie beguiles his host with lists of names and places, endlessly repeated, ignoring Nathan's protestations that he does not know these people. Every time Nathan tries to lead the conversation, Bernie prevents him by asking for a cigarette, prolonging the procedure of lighting and smoking. The talk of making cups of tea, the very phrase "I'll put the kettle on", is closely akin to a conversation between Gus and Ben in *The Dumb Waiter*. The commonplace activity becomes ominous. As with Gus and Ben, making tea becomes a challenge, implying a silent battle for dominance. The implication is reflected in the dialogue. Nathan's questions are weak and desperate, his sentences broken by Bernie's emphatic assertion of his certainty, and his strategic and antagonistic repetition of the words "tea" and "heard":

> NATHAN: Where are you going?
> BERNIE: She's gone to make some tea.
> NATHAN: Tea?
> BERNIE: Yes. You know ... *tea.*
> NATHAN: She might have said ...
> BERNIE: She did.
> NATHAN: What?
> BERNIE: She did say.
> NATHAN: Did she?
> BERNIE: Just now.
> NATHAN: She did?
> BERNIE: I heard her. I'll put the kettle on she said, I'll make us a cup of tea.
> NATHAN: I didn't hear her.
> BERNIE: *I* did. She said it. I *heard* her. (p. 19)

Beneath the menace lies the ultimate fear which makes an absurdity of life: the unavoidable reality of death. The play might be regarded as a preparation for, and a fleeting insight into, death. The structure, reflecting the movements of the mind, does not progress, it decomposes. Each scene becomes shorter, darker, less coherent. The images of enclosure, estrangement and menace accumulate and the conscious mind, in the final moments of the play, finally breaks under their pressure: Nathan loses all sense of who he is or where he is. He says goodbye to the woman who may, or may not, be his wife. His final realisation is that "life will go on in spite of me, so what is the good of worrying, what?" (p.

---

[16] Ronald Hayman discusses the concept of Pinter's "territorial man". Ronald Hayman, *Harold Pinter* (London: Heinemann, 1980), pp. 1-10 and pp. 125-7 (p. 125).

32). He lies back, sensing the world close before him and the eternal night sweep over him. The play dwindles into darkness and prolonged silence.

John Elsom's review of this play is fundamentally confused.[17] He argues that it is Bermange's most naturalistic piece in that it conveys with "agonising plausibility the experience of old age". This statement is clearly untenable: Bermange's is not a stable and objective 'reality', but that distorted rendition of the 'real' as mediated through the protagonist's perceptions. Elsom fails to realise that the forgetfulness of the central characters is not merely senility. The metaphor of memory loss determines the entire structure and movement of the play to such an extent that nothing is stable or fixed. When juxtaposed to the symbols of enclosure and death inherent in the lighting and the sets, the memory metaphor assumes existential connotations which transcend the immediate predicament of the pseudo-real protagonists.

The transition from the first play to the second should be regarded as a movement deeper into the subconscious. *Nathan and Tabileth* retains aspects of the 'real' world which cause Elsom to conclude, wrongly, that it is naturalistic. *No Quarter* (1962) strips off the vague 'realistic' accoutrements and presents the inner recesses in entirely metaphoric terms. The Fat Man, accompanied by a sinister and spectral Quiet Man, is forced for unknown reasons to spend the night in an isolated hotel. Though the hotel is in complete darkness (apparently caused by a power-failure) the Fat Man notices signs of an accelerated decay which is ultimately to leave him stranded on a tiny patch of landing. The discord of the mind is reflected in the deterioration of the building: physical erosion expresses the yielding of the inscape to chaos.

Changes to the set monitor the decay of the mind of the Fat Man. He feels alienated and isolated in the room chosen for him by the Landlord. His bedroom, "up in the clouds", is cut off from all other guests and from the rest of the building. It is sound-proofed, without window or clock. For the Fat Man, this sealed room, impregnable to sound, time, or light, is no more than a cell:

> FAT MAN: It's the thought
> of being trapped
> in a windowless room.
> QUIET MAN: Try not to think about it.
> FAT MAN: I can't help myself ...
> QUIET MAN: Then
> we must try to take your mind off it,
> mustn't we?
> Which way is North do you think?
> That way? That way? That way? That way?[18]

---

[17] John Elsom, 'Barry Bermange', pp. 50-2.
[18] *No Quarter and The Interview*, p. 45.

The darkness, which intensifies throughout, exacerbates his estrangement from his environment. He begs the Quiet Man to light matches to ward off the dark, and so provide him with a more meaningful relationship with his surroundings:

> FAT MAN: Light another!
> QUIET MAN: Why?
> FAT MAN: Please!
> QUIET MAN: Mr Barton
> You must
> pull yourself together.
> Surely you don't expect me
> to stand here
> striking matches for you
> all through the night.
> FAT MAN: One more.
> QUIET MAN: Then another. Then another.
> FAT MAN: Just one. (p. 46)

The collapse of the set is the prevalent and most powerful metaphor. At the beginning of the play, as the Landlord takes the two guests to their room at the top of the building, the Fat Man notices the first signs of deterioration:

> FAT MAN: I saw
> dead flowers in pots.
> QUIET MAN: Really?
> FAT MAN: I trod on a stair.
> It crumbled.
> QUIET MAN: No.
> FAT MAN: All the way up
> whole areas of banister
> fell away.
> Everywhere there is evidence
> of decay. (p. 32)

The Fat Man's fear of all things external to himself resembles Nathan's. Like Tabileth, the Quiet Man becomes a threat as overt and immediate as the unknown environment.[19] He repeatedly ignores the Fat Man's enquiries about his name, his background and his destination. He communicates a sense of menace, challenging the Fat Man, questioning his decisions and ignoring his entreaties.[20] There is an understated threat beneath everything that the Quiet Man says:

---

[19] The movement of two characters, held together by a bond of mutual distrust and dependence, from one room to another, is a familiar form amongst the absurdist. Deriving from the Estragon-Vladimir and the Hamm-Clov relationships, it is found, for example, in Pinter's *The Dumb Waiter*, Campton's *Memento Mori*, and Saunders' *Return to a City*.

[20] This technique is used very effectively in the later play, *The Interview*. This play is set in a waiting room prior to an unspecified interview. It gradually becomes apparent that all of the applicants, with the exception of Man Five, are part of a conspiracy. Man Five is alienated and eventually broken by a relentless series of apparently casual questions and off-hand comments. Whenever Man Five returns a question he is ignored.

FAT MAN: It's burning down again.
QUIET MAN: Why so it is.
FAT MAN: Light another one.
QUIET MAN: Would you like me to?
FAT MAN: Please.
QUIET MAN: Supposing
I were to say
that
this was my last.
FAT MAN: Is it?
QUIET MAN: My question first, Mr Barton.
FAT MAN: I don't know.
QUIET MAN: What?
FAT MAN: I don't know.
QUIET MAN: What?
FAT MAN: I don't know! I don't know! (pp. 45-6)

The Fat Man's disquiet is increased by the unexpected arrival of the Military Man. He claims to be a traveller, seeking refuge in the hotel. The Landlord has directed him to this room, though, owing to the increasing darkness and the advanced stage of deterioration on the stairs and landing, it proved difficult to find. The Military Man and the Quiet Man establish an immediate rapport from which the Fat Man is excluded. The third occupant treats the Fat Man with the customary combination of condescension and understated aggression:

MILITARY MAN: Come come, Mr Barton.
FAT MAN: Take your filthy hands off me!
MILITARY MAN: My dear sir.
It is the
hand of peace I offer ...
FAT MAN: Of what?
MILITARY MAN: Of peace. Friendship. Understanding.
I understand your feelings. (pp. 62-3)

As in *Nathan and Tabileth*, the image of the threatening environment is refracted through its hostile human occupants. Tabileth and Bernie, in the first play, and the Quiet Man and the Military Man, in the second, are immediate manifestations of that enigmatic menace which is expressed in the mutating settings.

Throughout these interactions, the darkness continues to thicken and the environment crumbles visibly. As soon as the three men settle down to sleep beams collapse inwards on stage and the lights are extinguished completely. In the short final scene we learn that the Fat Man and the Quiet Man are alone together again. The entire hotel has fallen and the two are stranded on the remaining patch of floor space: they are isolated, disconnected from anything else, surrounded by darkness and confusion:

FAT MAN: Where are you?
QUIET MAN: I am here.
FAT MAN: And the others?
QUIET MAN: They have all gone away.
FAT MAN: Will they be back?
QUIET MAN: They might be.
It's hard to say ...
FAT MAN: My head ...
QUIET MAN: Is it hurting you?
FAT MAN: When I move it.
QUIET MAN: Try not to.
Stand still. (pp. 92-3)

Theirs is a tacit, empty acceptance of their situation; a dejected awareness that things will not change; and a totally unconvincing human attempt to persuade themselves that they will be safe:

QUIET MAN: Meanwhile,
let us consider ourselves
in relation to the Universe as a whole.
Pause.
Determine
in which direction lies the North.
Pause.
Once we know this,
we will know where Hornsey lies.
Pause.
And ourselves.
Pause.
In relation to The World.
Pause.
We will do this standing still,
Mr Barton.
Pause.
FAT MAN: Standing still.
Pause.
QUIET MAN: Nothing terrible will happen to us.
Pause.
So long as we are standing ... Still. (pp. 93-4)

The play ends with both men, trapped on their deteriorating piece of landing, in profound silence, looking out into the darkness.

No Quarter is unusual in that instead of using increasing darkness to reinforce the feeling of disorientation and isolation, here Bermange uses bright light. The lighting remains full on throughout the play, in ironic contrast to the fact that the characters grope around because of the power-cut. The technique, in this instance, illustrates precisely the dilemma of the characters. For instance, in the third scene, the three men make a pathetic attempt at trying to establish contact in the 'dark':

He steps down from the bed.
He moves blindly to the chair.
He turns.
He passes QUIET MAN.
He moves slowly across the room.
His foot touches FAT MAN *who shrinks away.*
He returns to the front of the platform. (p. 53)

Deirdre Bair points out that in Beckett's later plays the lighting is so central that it might be regarded as a character in itself. In *Happy Days*, for instance, the bright light on Winnie, delineating her every facial gesture, might be thought of as an omnipresent commentator or silent, mocking narrator. This is true also of *Play*. The ferocity and abruptness with which the light switches from one face to another, willing them to speak, gives it the impression of being an inquisitor.[21] Bermange is the only writer of the English 'absurd' to utilise lighting in this way. Lighting comments on the misery and the displacement of the Fat Man and the Quiet Man with the same efficiency with which it exposes Winnie, Hamm and Clov. The lighting presents a clear dramatic image of man's isolation. People stumble their way through the scene, as they do through life, neither seeing nor understanding. Though they are desperate for contact, they shrink away from one another when this is achieved. When this convention was reworked by Peter Shaffer three years later in *Black Comedy* (1965), it was for the purposes of pure farce. Bermange uses the technique to orchestrate a danse macabre: the inter-woven series of evasions and collisions is grotesquely symbolic of man's hopeless predicament. The possibilities for humour, derived from the lighting arrangement, are immense. The comic tumblings and collisions are a long-running and very grim joke. We are reminded of the universalised vaudeville slap-stick of Estragon and Vladimir. This is a world without human contact, where laughter is a double-edged sword.

There is a tension in *No Quarter* between chaos and order. Chaos is manifested, on a wider level, in the crumbling set and, more immediately, in the physical clowning of the characters. The discord of their vaudeville pratfalls reflects in microcosm the collapse of their environment (the internalised world). The characters, sensitive to the deterioration, attempt to counter-balance it with patterned behaviour. The symmetry and equilibrium of patterning provides a temporary and fragile protection against the disorder. The Military Man, increasingly sensitive to the dangers of his illogical and unpredictable environment, attempts to synchronise the movements of his own body, and those of his companions, so as to maximise their regularity. He becomes the stereotypical sergeant-major demanding uniformity:

---

[21] Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Vintage, 1990), p. 602.

MILITARY MAN: You see,
You've got to have Order.
Know what I mean?
Order with a capital O.
Without Order,
everything goes to pieces ...
Order there must be
in anything and everything. (pp. 65-6)

The need for order is apparent in their sleeping arrangements. As they prepare to rest, the three frightened men attempt to comfort themselves by arranging their prostrate bodies into a very rigid pattern:

MILITARY MAN: Quite a neat little pattern
isn't it?
The way we are lying.
The general disposition of bodies.
QUIET MAN: Mr Barton is on the bed.
We are on the floor
on either side of him.
It is a
very neat pattern indeed. (p. 65)

The Military Man is emphatic in his desire for symmetry, betraying his anxiety in his repeated tirades against disorder:

MILITARY MAN: Much much better than
scattering ourselves
higgledy-piggledy
all round the room. Why,
supposing one of us
were to get up in the night?
It would be chaos in here,
absolute chaos ... (p. 65)

Military regularity assumes metaphysical connotations. The triumvirate of men, arranged in a harmonious and inter-locking symmetry, has biblical resonances:

QUIET MAN: We are a triangle.
Pause.
A triangle of men.
Pause.
We are three bodies sleeping together.
Pause.
And alone.
Pause.
We are a neat little pattern.
Pause.
We are a Trinity. (pp. 66-7)

At points throughout the play, movement and behaviour become ritualised, thereby imposing - as in the above example - a double-pattern upon the chaos: the bodily and the sacred/spiritual. As the men approach the door at the top of the stairs they establish, before the crucial moment of entering, a desperate pattern of sound and action which evolves into a ritual:

> FAT MAN: Hurry. Hurry.
> QUIET MAN: Up he comes. Up he comes.
> FAT MAN: Hurry. Hurry.
> QUIET MAN: Up he comes. Up he comes.
> FAT MAN: Hurry. Hurry.
> QUIET MAN: Up. Up. Up. Up. Up. Up. Up. Up. Up.
>
> *A balanced rhythm is established between footsteps and voices. It grows steadily louder, reaches a peak of great intensity, then stops abruptly as* LANDLORD *comes to a standstill between* QUIET MAN *and* FAT MAN.
> *He faces front without moving.*
> *Silence.* (p. 34)

Ritualised behaviour co-exists with stasis. Chaos suggests movement, spontaneity, unpredictability. The three men counter this with perfect stillness. At times of acute anxiety, a character will stand absolutely motionless. The body, in its regularity and predictability, becomes a symbol of order. At various intervals throughout the play, the characters resort to stasis in a desperate bid to regain control as everything around them submits to disorder. The Quiet Man initially employs the technique when the Landlord disappears with the only lamp, leaving him alone with his hysterical companion:

> FAT MAN: What are you doing?
> QUIET MAN: Standing.
> Standing very very still.
> I like standing still. (p. 27)

The various strategies to control the chaos are ultimately useless. Ritualised action disintegrates into slapstick and blind collisions in the dark. Stasis becomes another expression of enclosure. At the end of the play, as the men stand rigid and unwavering, believing that bodily control and symmetry will ensure that "Nothing terrible will happen", the darkness sweeps over them and the landing continues to diminish. In Bermange's next play, *The Cloud*, the chaos which encroaches upon the human condition is interpreted as the forces of death. The play charts the struggles of the mind as it reluctantly accepts the inevitability of death's approach.

5.2 "moving relentlessly in the great and awful void":[22] *The Cloud* (1964) and *The Mortification* (1964)

The technical innovations of *The Cloud* enable Bermange to interiorise the action on two levels simultaneously. The immediate environment (the room shown on stage) represents, in the same manner as *Endgame*, the inside of a skull; the wider environment (the landscape which contains the room) develops the metaphor, reflecting the protagonist's mental panorama. Bermange achieves the simultaneous presentation of the immediate and wider environments through the use of a screen.[23]

The stage presents a room in a deserted tower, the immediate environment. This room is little more than a patch of weak light surrounded by complete darkness; the small area of light (which emanates from a window in the wall) contains a simple table, a narrow bed and a screen. That the room presents a metaphoric reflection of the internal state is made clear by its gradual evolution throughout the play. The central character, the Husband, trapped within the weak light, is rapidly approaching death. He does not confront his fate with dignity, but tries instead to fight against it before ultimately submitting to panic. As his death comes ever nearer his mental deterioration is monitored by changes to the room. He upturns the table and chairs, and disturbs the bed, throwing the simple order into chaos. The light diminishes slowly throughout the play until, at the end, at the moment of death, the Husband and the Wife are glimpsed momentarily before they disappear into oblivion.

The purpose of the screen is to bring the "outside world" into the tower. Throughout the play there is an image of a lifeless beach projected onto it, representing the view from the window as it is perceived by the characters. The "outside world" as portrayed on the screen, is clearly not a real one. In its blasted and infertile state, it becomes an expression of the internal state of the perceiver. Each of the characters verbalise his perceptions of the external world and, in every instance, monotony and sterility are emphasised:

> Sky meeting land in a straight

---

[22] Barry Bermange, *The Mortification*, unpublished, p. 6.

[23] The technical vehicles used in this play to reflect the interiorisation process represent an interesting transition between his earlier and later works. In the first two plays the symbols of increasing darkness and diminishing space are juxtaposed with linguistic economisation in order to represent the restrictions placed upon the mental/subconscious world. In *The Cloud* these techniques are used in the presentation of the immediate environment (the room in the tower). Later plays such as *Scenes from Family Life* and *Invasion* were both written for television and utilise cinematic techniques (such as viewing the action through the distorted perceptions of the protagonists) in order to illustrate their mental collapse. The screen used in this play, projecting the 'outside' world as perceived through the illogical medium of the characters, pre-empts this technique.

> unbroken line of empty mashes.
> Mud.
> Samphire.
> Creeks winding slowly into a flat
> lagoonlike ocean.[24]

The most revealing feature of the landscape is that it is dying. It is incapable of sustaining any form of new life:

> The thousands of trees we saw, those trees that were dying ...
> 'Look,' I said, 'look at all those trees. They are dying ... (p. 97)

Bermange is careful to emphasise the connection between his characters and their environment. At the beginning of the play the Husband has to traverse the unbroken stretches of beach in order to reach the tower. His perceptions are described:

> Gulls. Shingles. Waves.
> His own rhythmic breathing.
> No more. (p. 5)

The stylised interpretation of the outer world, as mediated through the Husband's consciousness, provides a revealing insight into his internal state. The acres of dead trees and the unbroken expanse of beach become obvious images of his mental decay. The sound of the waves, heard through speakers, merges with the Husband's "rhythmic breathing"; the distant grumbling of a cloud evolves into the amplified beating of his heart, thereby reinforcing the absorption of the external into the internal. Later in the play the Husband's description of the environment emphasises the essential sameness of his internal and external worlds:

> I thought that ... coming here would help us, somehow, what do we find? ... an arid barren place, a sterile region, we find *ourselves*, our bleak and empty hearts, dead waters, dried up arteries, flat grey lagoons ... what chance have we in such a place, what chance in such a place where like meets like and shuns recognition what chance in such a place ...! (p. 66)

All external features, be they in the immediate environment (the dark room in the tower) or in the distance (the beach as seen on the screen), become metaphors of an internal state.

The plot of *The Cloud* is so fragile and undeveloped as to be superfluous. Four people, the Husband, the Wife, the Civilian, and the Soldier, are stranded in a tower by the sea. Their motives for being there are not clear; we are told, simply, that each is on a journey, that each has been forced to take refuge. During

---

[24] Barry Bermange, *The Cloud*, unpublished, p. 2.

their stay they are menaced by a cloud (monitored on the screen) which comes increasingly closer until, finally, it enters the room and shrouds everything in darkness.[25] The rudimentary plot lends itself easily to allegorical interpretation. The mysterious journey undertaken by each of the characters is the journey through life, broken, inevitably, by death (in the shape of a cloud).[26] The play's epigraph, a quotation taken from Virginia Woolf, provides a transparent illustration of the allegory:

> The hour is come: we must depart.
> The urgency of it all is fearful.
> Our short progress is cancelled:
> life severs us. A great moth
> sails by, showing the immense
> solidity of chairs and tables with
> floating wings. All will change,
> and youth and love: but beneath
> all clamour, all cries and uproar
> lie shells, bones, and silence. (p. iv)

The epithet reminds the reader of the unavoidable reality of death, the steady approach of life's ultimate truth, the cancellation and negation of everything. The fact of death renders life futile, if not meaningless, for beneath all of our "cries and uproar", our worldly ambitions and achievements, lies the silence of the grave.

Bermange uses at least three dramatic vehicles to explore the reactions of the human consciousness (the Husband) to the inexorable approach of death (the Cloud). The first, central to the interiorising process, is the transformation of the set. As in the previous plays, the room visibly diminishes - "a fraction darker, a fraction smaller than before" (p. 72) - as the cloud gets nearer. The mind is closing in on itself, limiting the possibilities for ordered thought and contemplation. The room-mind is eventually reduced to a tiny spot of light which is cruelly extinguished as the cloud enters through the window. The progress of the cloud is also monitored on the screen. The flat decaying expanse of the

---

[25] The image of the cloud, as a harbinger of fear and despair, links all three of the plays together. In *Nathan and Tabileth*, Nathan panics in his darkened bedroom because the net curtains remind him of clouds: clouds seen earlier, during his visit to the park, and associated with the detested outside world. On three occasions in *No Quarter* the two men remark that their room, being so high and isolated, must be shrouded in clouds.

[26] The movement of the play has many similarities with that of the later work, *Oldenberg*. The gradual approach of the cloud unleashes the Husband's deepest insecurities and fears, culminating in acts of destruction. In *Oldenberg* an elderly landlady and her husband await the arrival of a new tenant. As they wait they fantasise about his identity. Fantasy becomes a vehicle for communicating their worries and private terrors. The old couple eventually collapse under the weight of their fear and symbolically destroy the new tenant's bedroom. The pattern of both plays is the same: the advance of an unknown force aggravates man's inherent paranoia; man loses hold of reality, is submerged in fantasy, and ultimately (and unsuccessfully) attempts to sublimate his panic through destructive acts.

landscape/inscape is gradually obliterated as the "heavy distant mass of rolling darkness" (p. 8) comes closer. The worlds outside of and within the tower, as expressions of the internal reality, submit entirely to blackness and chaos at the moment of death.

Alterations in the Husband's behaviour and in his relationship with his three companions parallel the changes in the environment. Initially, when the cloud is a barely visible speck on the horizon, the Husband is presented as a rational, 'normal' person. He is first shown on the screen, walking across the beach, enjoying the space and freedom. Upon seeing the cloud his behaviour modifies, he appears unnerved. This first, unformed perception of death sends him rushing to the tower for refuge. Once inside the tower his behaviour becomes increasingly erratic as he yields to panic :

> ... oh this hovel! ... this sty ... this brokendown building! ... this room! ... these things here! ... now you! ... now the Soldier! ... now The Cloud! ... now EVERYTHING! ... all against us ... all against us ... all against us ... oh my bones, my bones, my bones ...[27] (p. 66)

The Husband's relationship with the three occupants is also redefined, as they change from identifiable individuals to menacing, enigmatic forces. The Wife, for instance, is hardly distinct from the two men. She is impassive, uninterested in their predicament. The Husband (rightly) interprets this lack of interest as a threat:

> THE HUSBAND: Just tell me what's going on.
> THE WIFE: You know!
> THE HUSBAND: I want to be sure ... Well?
> (PAUSE)
> THE WIFE: One hour from now ...
> THE HUSBAND: Yes? Go on.
> THE WIFE: One hour from now The Cloud will be here.
> THE HUSBAND: Who says so?
> THE WIFE: Hmm ...?
> THE HUSBAND: Who told you?
> THE WIFE: Told me?
> THE HUSBAND: The Civilian. Did The Civilian tell you?
> THE WIFE: Yes. Yes he did.
> THE HUSBAND: Go on.
> THE WIFE: That's all.
> THE HUSBAND: There was more.
> THE WIFE: Was there?
> THE HUSBAND: You know there was.
> THE WIFE: I've told you all I know.
> THE HUSBAND: There was more. I know there was. The

[27] The first letters of the two words "The Cloud" are written throughout the play in upper-case letters. This emphasises its extraordinary status: it is not a meteorological phenomenon but a metaphysical force.

> Soldier said something about The Cloud. About it stopping here.
> THE WIFE: Did he? (pp. 88-9)

The Civilian becomes the most dangerous, and certainly the most threatening, of the occupants of the tower. Everything that he says to the Husband is an implied challenge, a veiled provocation. He loses his 'personhood' and acquires ambiguous, almost ghost-like proportions. Like the Wife, the Civilian may be interpreted as another shifting manifestation of the irrational forces which assail the dying consciousness:

> THE CIVILIAN: I will refresh your memory ...
> THE HUSBAND: No need for that ...
> THE CIVILIAN: I think there is.
> THE HUSBAND: It wasn't important ...
> THE CIVILIAN: How do you know, if you've forgotten what you said?
> THE HUSBAND: I *have* ...
> THE CIVILIAN: Then I will refresh your memory for you John - you don't mind my calling you John ... Let us first concern ourselves with what Mary said - you don't mind my calling her Mary. Mary said 'What about The Civilian? What do you think of him?' 'I don't know,' you said. Then she laughed, didn't she ...
> THE HUSBAND: Yes ...
> THE CIVILIAN: Yes ... And you protested. 'No really. I don't,' you said. "Strange as it may seem I can't quite get him into focus.'
> (HE SMILES)
> 'Perhaps you do not want to.'
> (PAUSE)
> You know who said that don't you.
> (PAUSE)
> The Civilian in person, wasn't it - well wasn't it?
> (THE HUSBAND DOESN'T REPLY,
> THE CIVILIAN SHOUTS LOUDLY):
> WELL WAS IT OR WASN'T IT! (pp. 107-9)

The final stages of the play, immediately prior to the entrance of the cloud, lose all semblance of being 'real'. The relationship between the Husband and the three others is represented in patterns of persecution and interrogation, such as the two quoted above. The Soldier ceases to function as a believable character. He cautions the Husband about the cloud; menacing him with understatements concerning its destructive potential:

> THE SOLDIER: A good job it's moving then isn't it. I'd hate to think of it reaching us ... then stopping. Know what I mean? I mean I'd hate to think of us stuck here ... in the dark. You know. Indefinitely. (p. 82)

The Civilian persecutes the Husband by ignoring his protestations, responding to his every entreaty with a mocking homily on the futility of action and the impossibility of escape:

> THE HUSBAND: We must hurry! We must hurry! Where are my things! We are going!
> THE CIVILIAN: Going where John, going where, going where ...
> THE HUSBAND: Does it matter?
> THE CIVILIAN: Ah but it should ...
> THE HUSBAND: So long as we *go* ...
> THE CIVILIAN: Where? To follow the footprints in the campion? To smell the sweet wild smell of wild sweet flowers? To days of eternal hours? Where can you go? Back down the years to the beginning? But that is far, a lifelong journey. Are you sure you know the way? Why go? What's wrong with here? Perhaps you belong here, who knows? And who knows, this may be where the journey ends for you ... in a tower by the sea in late September ... sky meeting land in a straight unbroken line of empty marshes. Mud. Samphire. Creeks winding slowly into a flat lagoonlike ocean ... And a cloud ... the harbinger of darkness ...
> (THEN VERY QUIETLY)
> ... here in lonely solitude you may languish for ever and ever ... for here no sun will shine to warm your bleak and empty heart ... no laughing friends ... no birds ... no music. Is this where you belong, where you've been hurrying to, where all roads have been leading? (pp. 139-41)

The idea which arises from the Civilian's speeches is that existence amounts to little more than a sterile cycle of irrational events and sensations. Like Estragon and Vladimir, the Husband is caught in an existential limbo where he is destined to encounter the same chaotic flux repeatedly:

> We may always meet, we four, we may continue to meet forever ... you ... me ... Mary ... The Soldier ... like characters in a dream that keeps recurring ... keeps beginning ... a dream in which a cloud is always coming. (p. 143)

This declaration of the futile circularity of existence echoes a similar comment made at the beginning. Surveying his blasted surroundings, the Husband admits to "the feeling that even this is but a repetition of all that has gone before" (p. 4).

The most powerful medium through which Bermange explores the impact of death on the human consciousness is an elaborate dramatic imagery which is absent from the previous plays. The Husband's fate, indeed, the predicament of the human condition itself, is gradually unfolded through a series of images pertaining to chaos and despair. Most of the imagery is placed, deliberately, in the latter half of the play. The final moments of *The Cloud* are executed in almost total darkness. The Husband is caught in blackness, his body insentient and inert. He spews forth the horrific reality of his existence in vivid, evocative images.

Looking out on the rapidly approaching cloud, losing sight of everything around him, the Husband dares to iterate his fear:

> THE HUSBAND: ... especially of late ... of late I have felt very alone, of late I have turned in on myself - I am floundering in the darkness of my body, peering out through two small holes at a world that seems to have forsaken me. (p. 42)

The images of floundering and darkness are again conjoined when the Husband discusses his relationship with the Wife:

> a kind of darkness came, without warning, without any warning at all, just came ... no longer could we see one another, enjoy one another's company, we groped and floundered in the dark trying to find one another, we couldn't, we couldn't, we couldn't, the sunlight had gone from our lives ... gloom replaced it, deep impenetrable gloom with not so much as a spark to light the way, the way that led us back to one another, nothing, nothing, nothing at all. (p. 61)

The light inside the tower is replaced by the dark, in the same way in which the light within the Husband is engulfed in darkness. The external and the internal have become inextricable. Darkness builds up symbolically both within and without the Husband, eventually consuming him entirely.

Another image relates to the loss of control. The chaos of being, irrational and insane, is inevitably random and violent:

> THE WIFE: ... you howl distractedly in the darkness of your own stupidity - bemused is what you are, without reason, deaf to the world, lost in the forest of Self and ranting, roaring, whining, braying ... (p. 88)

Darkness, purposelessness and violence are associated also with struggle and suffering. The following image juxtaposes the chaos of darkness with the fruitless labours of Sisyphus, Camus' quintessentially absurd hero:

> All those years, of struggle, and toil, all those uphill years of toil, never ending ... no more, all gone now, vanished into the dark, swallowed up, with us, with everything. (p. 62)

The cumulative suggestion of the play's imagery is nihilistic. The human condition is lost and despairing, a "forest of Self" which is impenetrable and ultimately without meaning. Deprived of self-knowledge or identity, denied a rational or predictable relationship with his environment, man is doomed to an existence which is no more than a "chaos", "an abyss", a "void of silence". Thus

the play ends, as do *Nathan and Tabileth* and *No Quarter*, with the characters submerged in the "black gloom" and eternal silence of the cloud.[28]

In *No Quarter* Bermange evokes the essential anxiety which informs the human condition, the oppression of the consciousness by encroaching forces of darkness and chaos, through the image of two men propelled ever higher up an unknown, deteriorating building, to the utmost point of isolation. *The Mortification* presents, in inverse, an exact reproduction of this movement. Bermange's plot summary reads:

> The Victim, a trusted employee of twenty years' standing, finds his firm is acting oddly towards him. Eight times in the last two months he has been moved to a new office, each time lower down the building. Now he has reached the basement, and the two men who visit him ask strange and leading questions. The more he tries to rationalise his eerie situation, the more the Victim finds himself losing his bearings and becoming the helpless plaything of the mens' disquieting purposes.[29]

The central plot dynamic, like that of *No Quarter*, is based on the gradual disorientation and eventual debilitation of the protagonist (the Victim) as he is forced, for unspecified reasons, down each floor of an office block until he arrives at its lowest level.[30] Every stage of his descent is marked by enclosure:

---

[28] *The Cloud* has received less critical recognition than either of the earlier plays, probably because it remains unpublished. Taylor is the only reviewer to mention it, devoting a single sentence to the play in *Anger and After*, emphasising its tone of menace: "*The Cloud* [is] a tenuous, Beckettish piece about a group of people in a mysterious deserted tower, menaced by a mysterious cloud which gradually gets closer and closer". Taylor, p. 320. In an earlier article Taylor dismisses the play as a weak imitation of Beckett and Vian. Taylor's criticism focuses on the fact that the symbol of the cloud is ill-defined and ambiguous, and hence without consistency or impact: it could be an "image of terror" or of "guilt" or perhaps it might contain "nuclear overtones". Taylor's comments demonstrate a great deal of naivety in his understanding of the absurd, which derives its strength from the fact that its central images are vague and multi-dimensional, and suggest (as in the image of Godot) a variety of 'meanings'. See John Russell Taylor, 'The Cloud', in *Encore*, 11.2 (1964), 52-4 (54).

[29] *The Mortification*, p. i.

[30] The movement motif of *No Quarter* and *The Mortification* is typical of continental absurdism and resembles very closely the pattern of Boris Vian's *The Empire Builders* (1959) and Dino Buzzati's *A Clinical Case* (1953). *The Empire Builders* shows a family trying to escape from a mysterious noise by moving increasingly higher up a building, into apartments which decrease in size with at each stage of the journey. Esslin refers to Vian's play as "a poetic image of mortality and the fear of death" (p. 276). In Buzzati's play a middle-aged businessman is persuaded (though he has no illness) to stay in a large hospital. He is reassured that the people who are not really ill are on the top floor, the seventh, and this is where the businessman finds himself, initially. Each day, however, he is moved further down the building: on the sixth floor people are obviously more unhealthy; and on the fifth they are sicker still. Eventually, the businessman finds himself in the

VICTIM: It seems darker than the last one.
GUIDE: You only think it is.
VICTIM: Is it smaller than the last one? (p. 10)

The most significant aspect of the Victim's latest office is its complete isolation. He finds himself without a secretary or clerks. The room is dark and, despite its lack of furniture, in disarray. As in *No Quarter*, the room is sealed off, without windows, having only one door leading to a labyrinth of corridors. The overriding impression in both plays is of the individual trapped in a final destination, incapable of progress beyond his present situation. The fact that the Victim's descent has been dictated by sinister, unknown forces exacerbates the feelings of isolation and disorientation:

VICTIM: If you had lived through the past few weeks
as I have,
in a state of complete and utter uncertainty,
frightened to settle down
in case they came to move you again,
worried out of your wits
as to what it was all about,
why suddenly,
after all these long devoted years,
they had started tormenting you
by moving you in this way,
down ... down ...
department to department,
wing to wing ...
I've endured all I can endure.
I can endure no more. (p. 7)

The Victim's situation, like that of all of Bermange's characters, is absurd: he is literally out of harmony with an environment which is both alien and alienating. He does not understand where he is, how to escape, why he is where he is or who decided that he should be there. The absurdity, the absolute alienation, is intensified by the Victim's interaction with three visitors. These visitors operate rather in the same way as the peripheral characters in the earlier plays: they become immediate embodiments of the chaos surrounding the protagonist. They threaten the equilibrium with their disturbing questions and suggestions. The first of the assailants is the Guide. Though he is responsible for taking the Victim from room to room, he ignores all enquiries as to who he is or who sent him. Like the Valet in *No Exit*, he is an unexplained and sinister force, advocating capitulation, or at least stoicism, to the inevitability of movement:

---

basement, where he is left alone with the dead and dying. See Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Pelican, 1980), pp. 274-9.

GUIDE: You surprise me.
A man of your integrity?
Vulnerable?
After all these years?
Tut tut tut. No ...
Your skin should be like hide,
your nerves like fibres of jute,
you should be taking all this in your stride.
Look at you.
Wallowing in a swamp of self-pity
and indignation. (p. 8)

After the initial episode with the Guide, the Victim is visited by two enigmatic Callers, both claiming to be searching for "the man". The first Caller expresses disgust at the manner in which the Victim has been treated, inciting him to complain, suggesting there must be a conspiracy against him:

FIRST CALLER: I'd certainly make enquiries if I were you.
Yes indeed.
Moving you down here without a reason?
Not a stick of furniture in the place?
Not a chair for a guest?
And what about your things?
Something is going on.
VICTIM: I know.
FIRST CALLER: Something sinister.
VICTIM: I have felt it all along.
FIRST CALLER: You must definitely go into it. (pp. 32-3)

The Second Caller encourages the Victim to be proud of his new surroundings, assuring him that the basement must be the most prestigious part of the building:

SECOND CALLER: Oh I must say I like your style.
The little boy lost technique.
I love it, I love it.
I really do.
It's very effective.
Very effective indeed.
Were I less perspicacious,
I might easily get the impression
you were *anti* the idea of coming down here,
anti the idea of being here.
That you detested it.
That it played on your nerves.
That you saw it as an omen.
A nightmare.
That you suspected the management
of a plot.
A conspiracy.
In which you were the primal victim. (p. 59)

The Victim is disorientated and rendered vulnerable by the conflicting advice, and he begins to panic. Towards the end of the play, exposed and without protection,

his jumbled mind spews out a massive monologue, registering the submission to chaos:

> I knew.
> Suddenly I knew.
> From the depths of my being, instinctively.
> It was not to my benefit.
> No good can come of it.
> There was nothing to be gained by being here ...
> It was a dark and verminous dungeon.
> A spider lair.
> A place of awfulness, horror, forboding.
> Of emptiness.
> And echoes. (p. 77)

The monologue itself deteriorates, loses all sense of structure and logic, dwindling finally into a defeated silence:

> No trees. No sky.
> The sound of life denied me.
> The colour.
> The light.
> (SILENCE)
> Why?
> (SILENCE)
> Why this?
> (SILENCE)
> For what?
> (SILENCE)
> What was my crime?
> (SILENCE)
> Why the execution?
> (SILENCE)
> The slow descent to Hell?
> (SILENCE) (p. 79)

The Victim's capitulation is not an easy one. Like the Fat Man and the Husband, he attempts to fight against the darkness and the alien environment. His primary weapon against the chaos is one that Bermange's characters typically choose: order. He struggles to rationalise his situation: by tidying the room, but more significantly by threatening to contact his superiors for an explanation:

> We get what we want eventually.
> Out of
> what seems to be chaos
> comes
> what seems to be order. (p. 55)

On an immediate, corporeal, level he will bring about order through stasis. Like all of Bermange's victims, he holds desperately to the belief that stillness might counteract the chaos of movement:

GUIDE: Movement is the quintessence of life.
VICTIM: Not perpetual movement.
GUIDE: The more perpetual the better.
VICTIM: Not where Man is concerned.
With lifeless matter maybe.
The Sun, the Moon, the Stars.
But not with Man.
Man must rest.
If he didn't,
he would so fatigue his mind
he would cease to use it,
cease ever to think again,
Become lifeless matter himself
Moving relentlessly.
In the great and awful void. (p. 6)

When the Second Caller questions the Victim on his sudden impassiveness, he is told that he is exercising stasis:

VICTIM: I am the type who needs to be stationary.
Who doesn't like motion, impermanence.
SECOND CALLER: Who prefers the state of *stasis*:
standing still.
VICTIM: My body needs it. (p. 66)

None of the attempts to counterbalance chaos is successful. Order and stasis crumble inevitably beneath the approach of chaos. At the end of the Victim's final monologue, as he stands perfectly still in the silence, the Guide reappears from the darkness, to move him again, to lead him away.

Like *No Quarter* and *The Cloud*, the play invites interpretation in entirely interior terms. Mortification may be defined as the process of dying, as the decay of the flesh which has been affected by gangrene or necrosis. That this definition is attributable to the play is made clear at the end. The Second Caller, referring to the Victim's situation, exclaims:

The effect is mortifying.
There is a mortification of the senses.
One's reason goes to pieces.
There is a necrosis of the intellect.
And of the soul. (p. 80)

The title of the play, then, refers to the mortification of the mind in the closing stages of death: that process which is witnessed in *The Cloud.*

The play returns continually to the idea that the action unfolding on stage may be metaphoric: a dramatic manifestation of the movements of the dying mind. The Victim stresses repeatedly that external and physical reality have been jettisoned:

> The sudden shift
> from what was solid, real, comprehensible,
> to what is, or seems to be, gloomy.
> Doubtful.
> And rather terrifying. (p. 12)

The dominating idea is that, having lost all sense of the physical, reality must be internal:

> One shrinks inside oneself,
> like a snail into its shell.
> In goes the body,
> the horns following.
> One is completely out of touch,
> locked away,
> buried in a smooth round hump of darkness. (p. 13)

The events of the play encourage metaphoric interpretation. The play is set in an empty room in greying light. The room does not contain tangible objects or definable shapes. The peripheral characters are spectral, blurring into the darkness which surrounds the Victim. The author makes no pretence that these characters are real; they are forces of discord, products of that chaos which colours the subconscious. By the end of the play the Victim is in disarray, he has submitted entirely. There is no place to move to beyond the basement, the lowest point: the mortifying mind must finally succumb to death.

5.3 Language as a defence against chaos

An analysis of the linguistic constructs developed by Bermange demonstrates his absurdist preoccupations. It is through the language of his plays and, in particular, the devaluation of traditional and outmoded linguistic vehicles, that Bermange communicates the chaos which is fundamental to existence and which threatens to overwhelm the fragile veneer of order and control. According to Alvarez, language in Beckett's plays is an elaborate strategy to combat chaos which manifests itself in one of two ways: a profound and empty silence or a whispering of enigmatic, nihilistic voices.[31] The neurotic impulse to talk - be it by telling jokes, relating tales or recreating half-memories - springs from a desperate need to protect oneself (however temporarily and superficially) from a gradually encroaching chaos. As the chaos in Bermange's plays is so immediate

---

[31] A. Alvarez, 'The Plays: Carry on Talking', in *Beckett* (London: Fontana, 1973), pp. 78-111 (pp. 80-4).

and volatile, threatening to impinge on the protagonists at any and every second, the strategies evolved to guard against it are particularly rigorous.

Chaos means disorder and formlessness. To counteract this, language acquires a pervasive symmetry and internal structuring. Especially in moments of panic or stress the language assumes the tightness and regularity of rigidly patterned verse. The patterned repetition of significant words and phrases is one of Bermange's recurrent poetic devices. In the following extract, the Husband and the Wife, desperate to check the progress of the cloud, establish a closely patterned linguistic incantation, based on repetition, through which they hope to realise their desires for future times:

> THE WIFE: The sun will come after The Cloud.
> Your pains will float over the sea.
> THE HUSBAND: And The Cloud?
> THE WIFE: It will pass. And we will leave in the
> sunshine for happier places.
> THE HUSBAND: Will we be warm then?
> THE WIFE: We will carry the sunshine like a mantle.
> THE HUSBAND: Will we be happy then?
> THE WIFE: We will be two children then. (p. 45)

This duologue adopts the tone of a catechism, a religious question-and-answer session between a doubting novice and his reassuring elder.

The formulas of prayer, the most expressive form of existential architectonics, man's attempt to establish an ordered link between his immediate situation and an unknown world beyond, are ironically reversed by Bermange.[32] The episode from *No Quarter*, in which the three men, sensitive to the distant rumblings of the falling hotel, murmur an elaborate prayer-like cantillation, ends:

> QUIET MAN: We are a neat little pattern.
> *Pause.*
> We are a Trinity.
> *Pause.*
> We are the neatest pattern of all. (p. 67)

The benedictory formula is obvious: repeated expressions of faith and gratitude separated by regular silences in which the Lord's blessing is received.

Linguistic repetition is juxtaposed with the observance of certain actions. This close and stylised integration of word and action reflects the patterns of religious ceremonialism which underlie all of the plays, creating, for the

---

[32] The language of George Herbert's poems in *The Temple* (1633) offer an interesting comparison with the poetry of Bermange's plays. Herbert's intention, to reflect in his poems the divine harmony between man and God, is a revealing contrast to Bermange's. Bermange's plays show man, forsaken by God, attempting to construct linguistic bridges to salvation, but being thwarted repeatedly by that chaos which, embedded in his existential predicament, finds expression linguistically.

characters, temporary structures against the capriciousness and shapelessness of chaos. Nathan and Tabileth attempt to concretise their every thought and movement by reporting it. Nathan in particular monitors the minutest aspect of everything that he does, combining whenever possible, word and action:

> I am collecting the plates.
> (He carries them to a small adjoining kitchen.)
> I am taking them into the kitchen.
> (He puts them into the sink.)
> I am putting them into the sink. (p. 12)

The intricate combination of word and language acquires the formalised, religious intensity of a ritual.[33] Unfortunately, the ritualisation of language and action proves useless against the chaos. After the episode quoted above, Nathan, abruptly and unexpectedly, drops a plate. The forced symmetry and tenuous control of his monologue deteriorates in the ensuing speech and chaos takes over:

> It fell! I couldn't catch it. It fell before I could catch it, it smashed on the floor. Before I could catch it, it smashed! I tried to, Tabby, I tried to ... somehow I wasn't quick enough. It smashed! ... I broke a plate ... I wasn't quick enough. (p. 13)

Linguistic patterning does not always have a religious referent. Repetition is evident at *all* moments of crisis. Nathan and Tabileth are panicked by Bernie's arrival. Tabileth attempts to control the destructive spread of her fear by patterning her reactions:

> TABILETH: Our grandson. You know.
> NATHAN: I do?
> TABILETH: Of course you do.
> BERNIE: Of course he does. He's only pretending.
> TABILETH: Of course he is.
> BERNIE: Of course he is.
> NATHAN: I am?
> TABILETH: Of course you are.
> BERNIE: Of course you are. (p. 18)

The sudden disappearance of the Landlord in *No Quarter* provides a moment of potential chaos which the Quiet Man counters by repetition:

> He may be a
> very very short time.
> He may be a

---

[33] The religious under-tones of *Nathan and Tabileth* are apparent in the pseudo-biblical names of the protagonists. Nathan, a prophet, was the son of David, celebrated for his devout behaviour and his spiritual courage. The name Tabileth resembles that of Tabitha, a pious and zealous believer. It is an ironic reflection of man's position that the 'new' Nathan and Tabileth are utterly unremarkable; devoid of any holy attributes, emotional magnanimity or spiritual worth.

> very very long time.
> He may be back in a flash. (p. 25)

Structurally, one of the most significant aspects of repetition is its propensity for balancing. Balance brings that harmony and sense of regularity through which man might counterpoise chaos. In *The Cloud*, the Husband's speech to a recalcitrant and unloving wife, is perfectly symmetrical:

> It strikes me ... I may be wrong, in fact I know I am (at least I hope I am) ... but it strikes me nevertheless that there are times when you seem to forget - only *seem* to, mind, only *seem* to - times when you seem to forget, seem to forget that we are husband and wife you and I ... That's how it strikes me. As I say I may be wrong. (p. 38)

Framed by *it strikes me* and *I may be wrong*, the phrases *seem to* and *to forget* counter-balance one-another, repeating the same surging movement, and adopting the tone and equipoise of poetry.

It is no coincidence that *The Cloud*, the play in which the arrival of chaos is the most imminent and consciously monitored, contains extended passages of balanced, poetic dialogue. The Husband avoids the reality of his approaching fate by retiring into idealised reminiscences. He perceives the past (a time of safety) as an unbroken harmony. This is reflected in the closely patterned, symmetrical language which contains his memories:

> if only something could be done, what I would not give if only we could be as we were in the good old days, the jolly old days, the warm yellow days, the days of no care, no worry, of bliss, of joy ... if only something could be done ... what I would not give ... what can be done? If only something could be done to bring us together again, and forever, to renovate our love that we may laugh again, be gay again, have friends to tea and supper again, sit by the fire again, hold hands again, speak softly again, make love again ... remedies, remedies, what I would not give for remedies ... (p. 63)

In the closing moments of the play, the Husband withdraws with increasing frequency into poetic evocations of previous, happier days. In order to break this charmed circle of poeticised memories and awaken the Husband to the reality of his situation, the Civilian adopts linguistic formulas wherein rhythm and balance are given the grotesque obviousness of nursery rhyme:

> what would it be like with none, John, with none, John? What would it be like with none, John, with none? Standing around in the dark, John, the dark, John. Standing around in the dark, John, the dark ... (p. 127)

Prayer (for adults) and nursery rhyme (for children) serve the same purpose of ritualising and giving order to relationships through repetition and symmetry. By using children's rhyme perversely, to communicate isolation and death, the Civilian manages to shatter the Husband's reveries and prepare him for the final sensations of his life.

Bermange's fascination with poetic balance is not restricted to monologues. Individual sentences may be exactly symmetrical, such as in the three-stress utterance of the Wife, "To the beach. While you sleep. Do you mind?" (p. 46) or the two-stress exclamations of the Fat Man, "No light. No lift. No boilers" (p. 30). However, it is in the elaborate patterning of extended passages of dialogue that the harmonic properties of his language are most apparent:

> QUIET MAN: Mr Bink's lift.
> FAT MAN: He has a lift!
> QUIET MAN: It's out of order.
> It's been out of order
> for months now.
> FAT MAN: He might have said.
> QUIET MAN: He did say.
> FAT MAN: When?
> QUIET MAN: You were out of breath.
> That's when he said it.
> FAT MAN: Said what?
> QUIET MAN: That he has a lift.
> That it's
> been out of order
> for months. (pp. 28-9)

At other times, it is not a passage but a single, relevant word or phrase which is repeated throughout the dialogue. The vanity of the husband's desires for escape at the end of *The Cloud* are emphasised by the repetition of one sentence by the Soldier who appears linguistically and physically immobilised as death approaches:

> THE HUSBAND: We must flee from here!
> THE SOLDIER: Is there *time*?
> THE HUSBAND: There's always time! We must pack!
> We must go!
> THE SOLDIER: But is there *time*?
> THE HUSBAND: There's always time!
> THE SOLDIER: But is there *time*! (p. 138)

For Bermange, as for Beckett, language is informed by a fundamental tension. On the one hand, it is the medium through which the characters attempt to obtain a fragile control over their lives. However, language for the absurdists is also the vehicle for chaos. Estragon and Vladimir struggle to ritualise their

relationships within vaudeville patter, but these verbal formulas usually deteriorate into a random series of noises and meaningless phrases. Though the three speakers in *Play* and the mouth in *Not I* strive to control the disorder of experience through language, the very act of speaking perpetuates the chaos. A subtext of linguistic chaos coexists with the tight patterns and structures of Bermange's plays.

The compartmentalisation of perception and experience which is evident in *Nathan and Tabileth* also takes place on a linguistic level. Language is often separated into a series of simple, short sentences, each one containing a distinct image or idea. The reduction of language to a framework of independent units provides a verbal equivalent for the feeling of enclosure and entrapment which are communicated by the structure:

> NATHAN: No pigeons here. In here. In our home.
> TABILETH: Not here. No. Come along. (p. 11)

Aurally and visually the language reinforces the impression of claustrophobia, of perimeters drawing in. Nathan's thought-process, as reflected in both the structure and the language, is stark and economical, with each thought unit divorced from the next. There is no eloquence or flux in the language. The impression is of thought restricted to a series of impulsive and short-lived snatches at coherency.[34] In *No Quarter* Bermange develops this technique. The Fat Man and the Quiet Man are stranded in an environment with which they cannot sustain a rational relationship. Their inability to form logical or predictable connections is suggested in the dialogue which is often presented as a sequence of insular and staccato utterances:

> FAT MAN: I am tired.
> QUIET MAN: So am I.
> So is he.
> We all care.
> FAT MAN: I don't care
> about you two.
> QUIET MAN: I do.
> He does.
> Face facts ... (p. 61)

Complex sentence structures, with the rationally determined linking of clause and sub-clause, object and subject, reflect a world governed by laws, a world in which everything has its place and is interconnected. Bermange's tiny, end-stopped

---

[34] This technique is used to great effect in Bermange's later plays. In *Oldenberg*, for instance, the staccato, end-stopped dialogue between the Man and the Woman reflects their mental-spiritual limitations. There is a close integration between the restricted mentality of the characters and the cramped, compartmentalised language. *Nathan and Tabileth*, p. 40 and pp. 62-3.

sentences cannot accommodate these rational interconnections. Language, like existence, is enclosed within ever-decreasing units which have little relevance beyond themselves. This technique is developed in *The Mortification.* Monologues are peppered with prolonged silences. Sentences and individual words float like tiny islands, disconnected fragments, in a pervasive and threatening silence:

> I thought you had.
> (SILENCE)
> I could tell.
> (SILENCE)
> I sensed it.
> (SILENCE)
> From the beginning.
> (SILENCE) (p. 41)

Ultimately, nothing can be accepted as 'real' or 'stable' in Bermange's world and the characters are sensitive to the fact that, in these circumstances, exclamations of certainty are meaningless. Each clear and unequivocal statement is undercut by an immediate negation or expression of doubt. This technique peppers *Nathan and Tabileth*:

> I resent it being there. Do I? ... I am rising. Am I? (p. 8)
>
> Bernie's gone. Has he? (p. 26)

Language negates itself in *Nathan and Tabileth* by calling into question its every expression. In the following plays this technique is taken a stage further by avoiding expressions of certainty. Instead, language accumulates as queries and enquiries. At moments of stress questions proliferate:

> THE HUSBAND: Leave?
> THE WIFE: Why not?
> THE HUSBAND: Go where?
> THE WIFE: Does it matter?
> THE HUSBAND: You really think there's time? (p. 92)

Each of the Husband's questions is left unanswered. The Wife, having no solutions, merely responds with questions of her own. The tension in *The Mortification* rests on the Victim's questioning of his situation. The fact that there are no logical reasons for his isolation and persecution becomes a powerful comment on the human condition:

> Why?
> (SILENCE)
> Why?

(SILENCE)
Why are they doing this to me?
(SILENCE)
After all these years?
(SILENCE)
Why after all these years? (p. 36)

Language, as the tool of the desperate, is often misused. Instead of using it as a vehicle for potential communication, characters employ it to intimidate one-another and gain a precarious control over one-another. The spoken word is often exploited as a weapon which, as in Pinter's plays, can be as dangerous to the user as it is to those against whom it is used. The most unassuming and commonplace word may suddenly become alien and destructive. In the following example, the word "sec" (second) becomes, as it is used by the Quiet Man and the Landlord, a means of threatening the others. The Fat Man is not interested in the Landlord's promise to demonstrate the soundproofing of the room. The Landlord is insistent, and quietly aggressive, in his assurance that the procedure will *only take a sec*:

LANDLORD: It would only take a sec.
QUIET MAN: What's a sec. Mr Barton?
LANDLORD: You could spare a sec. Mr Barton.
QUIET MAN: One sec. Mr Barton. Just one. (p. 36)

Names can be used as a destructive mechanism. A technique familiar to Pinter is the rhythmic repetition of proper names. Names, which are often fantastic, are iterated rapidly and continually, until the language which contains them falls back, grey and unimportant. Against such a foil, the names stand in stark relief and acquire a power which is at once both magical and disorientating. Bernie uses names to ensnare Nathan:

BERNIE: Shame about Uncle Norman, wasn't it? ... Solly wanted to help him! But you know what Uncle Norman is ... *Lionel* was pretty cut up about it ... You should have seen his face when Ableman told him what had happened ... If it was anybody's fault it was *Henry's*! (p. 21)

Language is patterned to reflect the stalking of one character by another. Every pause or apparently casual evasion is part of the subtle strategy of attack:

FAT MAN: Where are the other guests! Where!
Are there other guests!
QUIET MAN: They are asleep.
In their rooms.
FAT MAN: Yes, but are they?
Can we be sure?

QUIET MAN *says nothing*.

FAT MAN: Where are you?

QUIET MAN *says nothing.*
FAT MAN *screams.*

FAT MAN: Where! (p. 33)

The two Callers in *The Mortification* try to beguile and ultimately break the Victim with words:

FIRST CALLER: They may even move you again.
VICTIM: No.
FIRST CALLER: They may.
VICTIM: No.
FIRST CALLER: They may.
VICTIM: God ...
FIRST CALLER: What's to stop them?
They have moved you once.
Well haven't they?
Well haven't they?
They have moved you once.
Well haven't they?
(SILENCE)
They haven't moved you more than once have they?
(SILENCE)
Have they moved you more than once?
(SILENCE)
How many times have they moved you? (p. 34)

Despite the attempts to build from language structures as controlled and ordered as prayer or poetry, words ultimately submit to, and express, chaos. The compartmentalisation of language into isolated, often disconnected, units reinforces the fragmentation of experience which is presented in the structure of the plays. Language is ultimately self-negating (a vehicle for unanswered and unanswerable questions) and self-destructive (a tool for disorientating and threatening others and thereby contributing to one's own disquiet). Underpinning all language are the images of despair, entrapment and isolation which find peculiarly vivid expression in *The Cloud*, and provide Bermange's ultimate definition of the human condition. Those moments when the dialogue acquires the symmetry and precision of poetry become a hollow mockery, for language will always deteriorate and dissolve, providing, in its stark, staccato sequencing and motifs of despair, a very real mirror for man's predicament.[35] The ultimate

[35] McWhinnie argues that in the later play, *Invasion*, "Bermange was searching beyond words, now become inadequate". The discovery of the earlier plays - that language is ultimately superfluous - led Bermange to concentrate increasingly on non-verbal formulas. The human condition is presented in later plays by means of violent stage images (*Invasion*) and ritualised behaviour (*The Interview*). See McWhinnie, pp. 7-9 (p. 8).

comment on language belongs with the Husband. During a moment of lucidity, he realises the facile and superficial nature of the spoken word: one cannot halt the progress of chaos with the artificial constructs of the finely-wrought phrase. He draws an analogy between language and leaves which fall, dying, from trees. As the leaves fall, useless and rotting, the tree is reduced to its skeletal self, a barely living image of the death which will inevitably engulf it:

> Words drop dryly from our lips like leaves from Autumn trees, rustling unnoticed to the ground ... a wind comes, it blows them all away ... more leaves fall, they too are blown away ... and when more leaves fall, they too, until the tree is bare, the branches empty ... no more to say, no more ... to say no more, no more ... (p. 66)

Writing in 1976, John Elsom was the first British critic to recognise the extent of Bermange's absurdism. He argues that Bermange's early plays are the only exception to his theory that England never had a theatrical tradition of the absurd: "the sense of cosmic anxiety in Bermange's plays is closest to the European models than any other British playwright".[36] Though Elsom's treatment of the subject is extremely cursory and he fails to develop this argument, his point is valid.[37] Bermange's dramatic metaphors for the chaos which informs the human condition are as powerful as those encountered amongst the French absurdists. Bermange universalises his experience, isolating his characters from physical landscapes and taking them further into their own distorted psyches. In each of his plays the recurrence of dominant motifs (circularity, enclosure, darkness, isolation) express with precision the nightmarish quality of internal experience.

---

[36] John Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), p. 106

[37] Bermange's work has been seriously neglected in Britain. I have found only one extended review of his plays in the English language: Elsom's monograph 'Barry Bermange' for the anthology *Contemporary Dramatists* (pp. 50-2). Elsom also mentions Bermange very briefly in *Post-War British Theatre* (p. 106). Donald McWhinnie's three page 'Introduction' to the Methuen *No Quarter and The Interview* provides the second longest review of his work, though it concentrates almost exclusively on *Invasion* (pp. 7-9). *No Quarter* is discussed in two paragraphs in Irving Wardle's 'Introduction' to *New English Dramatists* 12 (pp. 20-1). The revised edition of *Anger and After* devotes one long paragraph to all of the plays up to 1967 (p. 320). The limited amount of attention which has been given to Bermange's works demonstrates the poverty of current theatrical criticism.

CHAPTER VI

VISIONS OF FUTILITY: JAMES SAUNDERS

The early works of James Saunders, written between 1958 and 1962, evince the transition from a rudimentary and almost instinctual absurdism to a sophisticated and complex expression of the genre.[1] It is possible to identify and to discuss the stylistic and thematic variations fundamental to the evolution of his absurdist aesthetic: from the early existential plays, inspired by Sartre, to the middle plays, in which he investigates the potential of a symbolic and presentational mode, to the 'pure' absurdism of *Next Time I'll Sing to You* (1962).[2] Though his dramaturgy is essentially one of diversity and relentless experimentation, Saunders remains loyal throughout to a vision of mankind locked in a futile struggle to establish rational or moral links to a world which is both mystifying and hostile.

The first stage of Saunders' development as an absurdist centres on his discovery of Sartre.[3] He admits that "the fad for realism and political banner-waving [which] infiltrated the stage after Osborne" did not concur with his own dramatic vision, which "was fixed on the elemental truths".[4] For an aspiring playwright who had "nothing to offer except a gut-belief that man was doomed ... alienated in an incomprehensible world", the French existential writers "came as a blessed relief".[5] After an initial reading of Camus, and exposure to "one or two plays by Sartre, of which 'The Flies' stands out", Saunders decided to reject English models and to focus, instead, on French sources:

> Sartre's plays reached further than Osborne's or Wesker's ... they touched upon spiritual and existential issues which had no place in our theatres. I decided that this is where my own plays would go.[6]

---

[1] Before 1958 Saunders had written a number of short plays which relied firmly on the drawing-room format: *Cinderella Comes of Age* (1949), *Love and a Limousine* (1952), *The Drop Too Much* (1952), *Moonshine* (1955) and *Women Are So Unreasonable* (1956). These were, for the most part, conventional plays of the Rattigan tradition

[2] James Saunders was born in Islington on 8 January 1925. Educated at Wembley County School and University of Southampton. Married Audrey Cross in 1951. Formerly taught English in London. Since 1962 he has been a full-time writer. Recipient of an Arts Council Bursary, 1960, 1984; *Evening Standard* Award, 1963; Writers Guild award, 1966. See *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by K.A. Berney, 5th edn (London: St. James Press, 1993), pp. 579-80.

[3] The 'existential' theories of Sartre, and the relationship between these theories and absurdism, are discussed in J.L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 2: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 117-24.

[4] Letter to the author, 27 July 1993.

[5] Letter to the author, 27 July 1993.

[6] Letter to the author, 27 July 1993. In this letter Saunders reveals that Stephen Joseph, the director of his earliest plays, encouraged his movement away "from Rattigan ... and, soon after, from Osborne" and his experimentation with Sartrean themes.

At the beginning of his career, Saunders "wanted to follow the way of Sartre and Camus ... to investigate the dilemma of man caught in a world which he doesn't understand ... to unearth those reasons at the root of man's unhappiness".[7]

6.1 "alienated in an incomprehensible world": *Dog Accident* (1958), *The Ark* (1959) and *Committal* (1959)

Motifs of alienation and displacement are central to the early works of Sartre and Saunders alike. The protagonists of *Dog Accident* and *The Ark* are trapped in an environment which they find cruel and disorientating. Like Sartre, Saunders explores the relationship between an individual and his environment in moral terms, querying whether the individual is responsible for, or equipped to challenge, the problems inherent in his context. In both plays, the moral or spiritual decay which is ingrained in the fabric of life overwhelms the individual, rendering him incapable of action.

In *Dog Accident*, a young man, Alex, is horrified when his friends are unmoved by the sight of a wounded dog:

> ALEX: Don't do that! What are you doing?
> PETE: What?
> ALEX: Don't kick it.
> PETE: I wasn't kicking it, I was just sort of nudging it. To see if it's alive.
> ALEX: Well don't. Leave it alone.[8]

Alex's tenderness is such that he appears incapable of accepting the fact of the dog's death. Initially, he clings to his belief that he saw its leg move and he dismisses his friends' explanations of rigor mortis. Despite their insistence that they are in a hurry, Alex crouches by the dog, determined not to abandon it while it still lives:

> PETE: Alex wants to stay a bit.
> JOHN: What for?
> ALEX: Till it's dead.
> MATT: It is, I told you. It's as dead as it can get. How much deader do you want?
> PETE: Come on, Alex. We'll miss the picture.
> ALEX: It's not dead.
> PETE: What makes you think that?
> ALEX: Leave it alone! Don't touch it! (p. 7)

---

[7] Letter to the author, 30 August 1993.
[8] *Dog Accident*, unpublished, p. 1.

Alex is clearly incapable of offering a realistic counter-argument to Matt's claim that rigor mortis is setting in. When asked to defend his insistence that the dog is still alive, he responds with angry outbursts, chastising them for "mauling" the dog:

> ALEX: It's not that I'm a ghoul. It's just that ... someone ought to stay with it, that's all!
> MATT: He's just the same in Biology. And you remember that one-eyed kitten we found in the playground, and he insisted on taking it home. (p. 10)

The reactions of the other boys are set up in deliberate contrast to Alex's. Matt distances himself from the incident by making objective statements on the nature of rigor mortis. John, on the other hand, disassociates himself by mocking Alex's concern:

> Here, Alex! ... There's a dead ant here! You can take care of it when you've finished with the dog! (p. 10)

The reaction of human beings to the *fact* of death fascinates Saunders, as does the responsibility of the living towards the dead or dying. In later plays, this fascination is to develop into a concern with the responsibility of those who are strong, emotionally as well as physically, towards the weak and needy. In the reactions of Alex's friends, Saunders attempts to establish a number of partial answers to these questions. None of them is correct. Matt's objectivity and John's cruelty are clearly not the 'right' responses: yet, when we compare them to Alex, we see that they are not entirely negative characters. Saunders respects them for at least being able to cope with death, in whichever way they choose. Alex's humanitarianism is potentially harmful as it survives by ignoring incontrovertible facts of life.

At the end of the play, when Matt and John have left, Pete informs him that the dog has "stopped shaking". Alex has used up all of his defences and can no longer reject the truth. He realises for the first time that his concern has been fruitless. The coping mechanism which he subsequently adopts, born of his unrealistic compassion, is equally self-destructive. He leaves the accident hostile and aggressive:

> ALEX: Come on then! We'll miss the start of the picture!
> PETE: Is it dead?
> ALEX: Course it's dead. Stupid animal. Could have caused an accident. Come on! (pp. 11-12)

The nature and the extent of human goodness; man's reactions to the inevitability of death; the brevity and painfulness of existence; and the basic responsibilities of the living towards the dying are themes which reappear frequently in Saunders' and in Sartre's plays. In *Dog Accident* they are presented in a honed-down, simplified fashion. In his next play these questions are presented at a level at once more complex and existentially resonant. Alex evolves into Shem, and the young man's feeling of responsibility towards a dying dog is re-worked as Shem's moral outrage at a God who is willing to allow his entire creation to perish.

Saunders regards *The Ark* as his "tribute to Sartre" in that it "combines considerations on the nature of existence" with "a superannuated surface realism".[9] *The Ark* might be regarded as Saunders' answer to *The Flies* as it takes, as its subject, a classical myth (the Old Testament story of Noah) and converts it into an existentialist parable which examines the consequences of man's refusal to accept a world which has become intolerable to him. In spite of its conventional use of narrative and its reliance on polished linguistic forms, *The Ark* contains the germ of Saunders' absurdism, as it brings together most of those themes which were to dominate his later, Ionescan plays.

The Sartrean aspects of *The Ark* centre on the protagonist, Shem, a character as realistic and as complex as Orestes in *The Flies*. Owing to Shem's eloquence and his sensitivity to the problems which surround him, the audience is invited to interpret the world from his perspective:

> The world as a place which is without justice or meaning is monitored through the eyes of my most psychologically convincing character. Shem recognises the real horrors of existence because he has not - like his family - sacrificed his individuality or his integrity for God. He questions.[10]

From his initial appearance in scene one, Shem is established as the malcontent, an antediluvian Jimmy Porter. Whilst his pious brothers, Ham and Japheth, work themselves furiously in preparation for the flood, he sits and thinks silently. From his first interaction with Ham it is evident that Shem is unhappy with the terms laid down by God and interpreted through Noah. Ham, on the other hand, is content to obey, to accept the words of his elders as indubitable and to perform his duties to the best of his abilities:

> HAM: We're told what to do. What do you want to think for? ... I don't understand ... What's wrong with you lately? Talking to you is like talking to a ... God's told us what to do. Isn't that enough?

---

[9] Letter to the author, 3 August 1992.
[10] Letter to the author, 3 August 1992.

> SHEM: It should be, shouldn't it?
> HAM: Then what do you want?
> SHEM: More ...
> HAM: More ... More than God's ... word?[11]

The play unfolds as a series of duologues, as Shem approaches in turn his brothers, their wives, and, eventually, his father, imploring each to question the rightness of their actions. It is through this sequence of interactions that the considerations of the play are brought into the open and discussed. The scene with Ham, for instance, focuses on the question of justice. Shem cannot accept God's judgement over man. He recognises God's moral responsibility to his creation and cannot believe that he now wishes to rid himself of it. To Shem, it is not man who is at fault, but God. Man did not make himself imperfect, God made him so. As such, God is unjust in wanting to destroy man:

> SHEM: Think, for instance, if you were one of that lot out there ...
> HAM: But they are corrupt!
> SHEM: Can they help it?
> HAM: What does it matter? They're corrupt.
> SHEM: They're going to drown for it. And if they can't help being corrupt ...
> HAM: God made the choice. Not us.
> SHEM: ... Generation on generation, clambering on each other's back, stumbling over each other's bodies, to end suddenly like an unfinished sentence whose meaning nobody will ever know. Lost, lost, lost. Because they, like us, did what they had to do. Like you, Ham; and me ...
> HAM: Not like us! Do you question God's will! (I.11)

During the conversation between Shem and his wife, which follows shortly after, Saunders directs our attention to the dangers of blind devotion: Shem is terrified by the mechanisation of those who accept without question the dictates of any being or power external to them. Shem interprets his father's righteousness as cruelty and equates his single-minded devotion with a dangerous lack of human understanding. He realises that it is God and Noah, God's vassal, who are responsible for the corruption on earth. Their standards are so unrealistically high that no mortal man could possibly reach them. Man is not even given a chance but is condemned from the start because he is a man. Noah *creates* evil by interpreting everything that man does as debauched:

> SHEM: On our wedding day, when you first felt Noah's pink eyes on you, that was when it began to go wrong. The ark was with us then; in Noah's eyes it floated above the corpses of the unrighteous. Noah was born with that vision ... Eve had to get an apple to learn about sin; you had only to look into Noah's eyes, and there it

---

[11] *The Ark*, unpublished, I.6

> was, lust, lechery, blasphemy; and the punishment too Noah sees with God's eyes, his God's, things change as he looks at them. An ordinary human action becomes ... dirty. You shouldn't have married into this family, Shem's wife. You were too real; too easily corrupted. This is a damned family. (II.10)

Shem realises that, since Noah is merely an unthinking vehicle for God's will, it is God, the initiator of man's weaknesses, who is at fault. According to Shem, man was a half-hearted attempt by God. Now that He has lost interest in His toy, He wishes to get rid of it. Shem will not accept God's decision. God *must* have a responsibility to man: He is neglecting His moral obligation. It is no surprise that man has gone astray when his Creator is flawed:[12]

> *Listen* ... Once there was a garden, and in it Adam, the first man, favoured only child of God, lived in innocent contentment with his ...
>
> *He pauses looks upward.*
>
> *No* ... It's wrong ... *This* is how it was. Adam, God's creature, the last invention of a creator tired of creation, sated with creation, who, even as he breathed life into this last toy breathed it as a sigh of despair; and having created it, *half* created it, half-formed, incomplete, like a newlyborn deformed ape, the ageing God of creation left his last grotesque child where it lay; and retired ... This was Adam, a creature not ape and not man, roaming on all fours through a half-dark alien Eden, carrying in his breast the anguish of a late deformed child disowned by its father and on its breath God's bitter despair. (II.4)

Within the discursive and apparently realistic framework of the play it is possible to detect, in embryonic form, elements of the presentational and metaphoric mode which is to predominate in subsequent works.[13] In the third and fourth acts, Shem abandons altercation and discussion and expresses his discontent through a series of symbolic gestures. He visits the village, home of the sinners, and takes from it a crippled dog. He sits with it by the now completed ark, nursing it and giving comfort:

> There you lie, in the arms of a perfect stranger, mangy, three-legged, with one eye gone and death in the other; there you lie with an expression of acceptance, of resignation, almost a sort of doggish beatitude. No complaining from you. (III.13)

---

[12] Shem's speech represents, in many ways, Saunders' treatise on the absurdity of life, expressing those ideas which are implicit to all of his subsequent works and which are fully realised in *Next Time I'll Sing to You.*

[13] Saunders admits that "Looking back at the play [*The Ark*] I was surprised to find the beginnings of a simple Beckettianism ... I am thinking in particular of the episodes with the lost child and the dog". Saunders concedes that, as these figures occur prominently in *Endgame*, they may have been taken unconsciously or semi-consciously from that play. Letter to the author, 3 August 1992.

When Ham arrives, Shem attempts to persuade him to save the dog by allowing it on to the ark. Ham's reaction is one of disbelief, which changes to revulsion when he realises that it was found in the village. It becomes clear that for Shem, the dog, confused and dying, though fundamentally innocent and trusting, is a symbol for the whole of civilisation. Inevitably, Ham walks away horrified, and the dog is left to shiver and die in Shem's arms. It is at this stage that Shem decides to revolt. If humanity is to be left to die, then he shall die with it. He is, after all, neither better nor worse than the dog, the humanity that has been left to perish.

At the end of the first part, after the demise of the dog, a small child arrives. Being in a state of dejection and disillusionment with the hypocrisy around him, Shem welcomes her. She too is from the village. The dog, maimed and blind, represented the inevitable corruption of an essentially good civilisation; the girl with her beauty and gentleness represents its innocence. Having taken a bite of the apple that he has given to her, she returns it to Shem, as it is a thing to be shared. Her only line, as the scene closes, is an expression of concern: "Why are you crying?" (IV.14). The apple, in turn, assumes its own symbolic significance. Shem, having cradled the vulnerable child, awakes to find her missing. Only the apple remains. How can he possibly join the righteous crew in the ark now? It would be impossible to forget that they have survived, unjustly, whilst the innocent and the good, the hope represented by the little girl, have been ruthlessly destroyed:

> Forget it, forget them, go into the ark, bolt the hatches, close our ears, sit tight in our little floating world outside which is nothing but an unpleasant dream we once had an aberration of the mind, unreal, best forgotten ... Only here's the snag: the toothmarks of a child in an apple. What can we do about that Japheth? Look, it's real. See, look, one, two, then a gap ... a tooth missing ... and one two, three. Why did she take one bite only? Was it too sour for her? But they're not sour, these apples, they're good. (V.3-4)

Further indications of Saunders' movement towards an absurdist aesthetic can be found in the mode of characterisation. Whereas Shem is a rounded and credible character, a 'real' and identifiable person, those around him resemble, at times, Ionescan automatons. In contrast to his son, Noah is a starkly two-dimensional character. As the dispenser of religious order, the machine of the divine, he is presented to us with the bold and simplistic outlines of a medieval relief. On his two brief appearances he is devoid of individuality or of human characteristics, and his speech is a pastiche of Christian dogma and biblical rhetoric:

> Purify us, O Lord! Make us clean! Let him who is beyond redemption be cast into the waters, yea, even the first-born of Noah! But let the ark be sweet! Let the ark be clean! (II.8)

Ham also has resemblances to an Ionescan caricature. His monologues are a jumbled and unthinking rendition of pre-programmed Christian platitudes. He has signed his inner abdication and is perfectly happy to accept the rules and the dictates of the external and alien world:

> HAM: The satisfaction of a task completed surpasses all other joys. To sit knowing one's duty is done, knowing one has no more decisions to make, no more problems to solve, no more questions to ask; one has simply to await ... further orders. Bliss ... Look at the Garden of Eden. There was a case. That was a perfect closed system if you like. No work to do, no decisions to make; then they started to think. And what was the result? Complications, complications. It's always the same. (II.4)

Even though the distinctive features of Sartre's theatre are prominent the substratum of metaphoric devices suggest that Saunders' inclinations lie elsewhere. For Saunders the limited absurdist interludes in the play are revealing: "I enjoyed the symbolic episodes with the apple and the dog ... [and thought that] the hell-fire Noah reached into the heart of the play".[14] He argues that he recognised the flaws in *The Ark* ("too much discussion, too many words"[15]) before its completion and was determined, in his next play, to rectify these:

> Sartre's plays allowed too much space for commentary and for dogma ... Ionesco didn't talk about things, he utilised all of his dramatic resources to show things in action.[16]

Committal (1959), written within a few weeks of finishing *The Ark*, was, for Saunders, his "first genuinely absurd play ... [which] translated the ideas of the earlier plays into a framework which forsook discussion".[17] The change of form came about, in large part, as a response to seeing a production of *The Bald Prima Donna*:

> In the second half of the fifties the play which opened me up was 'The Bald Prima Donna' ... This had an immediate effect, partly because the themes appealed to me, but mainly because it threw away the text book. I almost immediately started being Ionescoish

---

[14] Letter to the author, 3 August 1992.
[15] Letter to the author, 3 August 1992.
[16] Letter to the author, 27 July 1993.
[17] Letter to the author, 14 October 1992. Saunders refers, elsewhere, to "the relief of escaping from language after the biblical epic [*The Ark*]". Letter to the author, 12 March 1993.

> ... The influence stands out in 'Committal' and is followed up in 'A Slight Accident', 'Alas, Poor Fred' and 'Barnstable'.[18]
>
> Ionesco shares many of Sartre's opinions - [though] he has devised means of expressing these opinions extra-linguistically - I left the theatre itching to try my hand at this style ... and came up, first, with 'Committal' and the host of short plays which followed it.[19]

The basic situation in *Committal* is close to those in the previous plays, focusing on the estrangement of man from an antagonistic environment. The central character, Wall, on unspecified "urgent business", is sent from room to room in a massive commercial complex and is systematically ignored by each official. His attempts at stating his business and of asserting his personality are inevitably fruitless as the series of unnamed officials undertake their duties, untouched by his interruptions. The structure reflects his predicament. Wall moves through a series of bland, anonymous rooms, each containing what appears to be the same man (or a sequence of indistinct and interchangeable bureaucratic automatons). In each room the same conversation is repeated, both characters iterating the respective clichés of the weary client and the officious civil servant:

> WALL: Wall, sir. I was -
> OFFICIAL: Hm?
> WALL: Wall, sir, H ... Wall. I was told -
> OFFICIAL: Speak up.
> WALL: Wall, sir. I was -
> OFFICIAL: Impossible.
> WALL: *Wall*. Wall. H -
> OFFICIAL: (*resuming his exercises*) Never heard of you.
> WALL: But -
> OFFICIAL: Wrong department. Try next door. Try over the road. Try the next street - Not here. Good morning.[20]

In *Committal* Saunders avoids, for the first time, the realists' reliance on language. Wall hardly speaks throughout the play, and the patterns of repetition and circularity communicate, instead, the futility and isolation of his predicament. The break from language as a communicative mechanism or as an essential plot vehicle, was, for Saunders, fundamental to his development as an absurdist: "I learned from 'Prima Donna', and this is first shown in 'Committal', the significance of form ... My eyes were opened to the possibilities of structure, of images,

---

[18] Letter to the author, 2 January 1992. Saunders goes on, in this letter, to admit that "after I saw 'Waiting for Godot' I started to write plays courtesy of Beckett ('Return to a City' and 'Next Time')". In his account of the works of Saunders, Tish Dace identifies Ionesco, Beckett and Pinter as three of the lasting influences throughout his dramatic career. See Tish Dace, 'James Saunders', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 462-5 (p. 464).

[19] Letter to the author, 14 October 1992.

[20] *Committal*, unpublished, p. 1.

of symbols - those things which I had previously thought of as secondary to language - even superfluous".[21]

6.2 The deepening of the absurd vision: *Alas, Poor Fred* (1959), *Barnstable* (1959), *A Slight Accident* (1961)

At Saunders' request, a series of workshops organised by his local theatre group, took Ionesco as their subject, using material from plays which had been popular in London up until 1958.[22] Increasing exposure to Ionesco throughout 1959 enabled Saunders to diversify his range of absurd techniques, and to enrich his appreciation of the genre. Each of his plays written between 1959 and 1961 derives from Ionesco, and provides evidence of the gradual maturation of Saunders' absurdism. He comments:

> I did not see myself as a plagiarist ... I am an Elizabethan when it comes to sources ... I believe that an artist should learn his craft from the Masters. [Moreover] my perspective was similar to Ionesco's and thought his style of theatre the only accurate way of showing it.[23]

Cumulatively, these three plays represent the deepening of Saunders' absurd vision. The essentially moral and tentatively optimistic out-look of *The Ark* (in as much as Shem attempts to comment upon, and take action against, his immoral environment) is transformed into one of despair. The plays are suffused with a genuine feeling of absurdity which, like Ionesco's, is expressed through humour. Generally speaking, *Alas, Poor Fred* takes on the themes and techniques of *The Bald Prima Donna* and *Amédée*, tracing those procedures through which man has become spiritually bereft, a being devoid of an inner-life. *Barnstable* takes the vision of the preceding play a stage further, presenting the fate of man who, as a result of falling out of harmony with his environment, finds himself stranded in a decaying half-world, an existential limbo. The last of the plays, *A Slight Accident*, elaborates upon the idea that life is a random and purposeless sequence of events, encapsulated in circular patterns of sterility and inanity.

Alas, Poor Fred, which is sub-titled "a duologue in the style of Ionesco", is one of the closest English approximations to a pure absurdism in the 1950s.[24] It

---

[21] Letter to the author, 14 October 1992.
[22] Saunders recollects working on *The Chairs*, *The Lesson* and *The New Tenant*. Letter to the author, 30 August 1993.
[23] Letter to the author, 14 October 1992.
[24] *Alas, Poor Fred* is the only play considered in *Anger and After* which Taylor states, unequivocally, to be "in an unmistakably post-Ionesco style". John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 198.

focuses, like *Amédée*, on the symbol of a dead body.[25] In Ionesco's play, Amédée and his wife, Madeleine, are expressions of "a universal petite bourgeoisie". They typify the spiritually and emotionally broken conformists who inhabit the world. Their inner-abdication is reflected in the image of a giant corpse which grows in their living-room, a metaphor which demonstrates that their love, and with it their capacity for humanity and dignity, is dead.[26] Ionesco's characters are remodelled in the figures of Mr and Mrs Pringle. In their grotesque suburban living room, the Pringles reminisce over Fred, who has died some time before. The process of recollection reveals amazing disparities in their memories of Fred:

> PRINGLE: He had no moustache. He was clean-shaven.
> MRS PRINGLE: Fred had no moustache?
> PRINGLE: He had *whiskers* growing out of his *nose*.
> MRS PRINGLE: Fred?
> PRINGLE: Not whiskers. Hairs. Quite long hairs. Almost whiskers. But not what you could call a moustache.
> MRS PRINGLE: Of course he had a moustache. A long straight one.[27]

As the reminiscences acquire increasingly outlandish proportions, it becomes obvious that Fred never existed. He is a metaphor for the love of the couple, which has faded so long ago that it is now little more than a distorted memory. Their interaction, as they struggle to remember what Fred (love and human dignity) was like, becomes an overt demonstration of those characteristics which led to the love-loss in the first place. Like the automatons of *The Bald Prima Donna* and *Amédée*, they are incapable of sustaining any sentiment or thought for any length of time. Their duologue becomes a collection of random clichés; conversational momentum is dictated by the mechanical associations of the platitude:

> PRINGLE: I can't get over poor Fred.
> MRS PRINGLE: It's best not thought about.
> PRINGLE: That's true ... It seems like only yesterday.
> MRS PRINGLE: Time plays funny tricks. (p. 3)

Saunders equates the mechanisation of man with violence and destructiveness. Episodes of reported speech indicate that the internal world of both characters is fragmented and given over to destruction. Mrs Pringle is caught up in paranoid fantasies of being murdered or committing murder:

---

[25] Though *Amédée* was not produced in London until 1963, it was first performed in England at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge in 1957. Saunders knew of the play at the time of writing *Alas, Poor Fred* and acknowledges it as an influence. Letter to the author, 12 March 1993.
[26] Eugene Ionesco, *Notes and Counter-Notes*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1964), pp. 186-7.
[27] James Saunders, *Alas, Poor Fred* (London: Marshall, 1960), p. 5.

> MRS PRINGLE: (*Knitting*) In all these years I have never known him stand behind my chair. Why should he do so tonight? ... Is he going to kill me? Dear God, shall I scream? Shall I fall to my knees, bare my breast to his knife and implore his forgiveness? (p. 18)

The vision of violence culminates in the dream of insanity:

> If only I could go mad just for once. Not just half mad, not just a little dazed, but really, really and truly mad ... If only I could leap over the battlements of sanity and ... and ... what would I do? Yes ... I should unravel my knitting. I should unravel my knitting, every stitch. Delicious madness. (p. 11)

The literary tradition of 'divine madness', of the mad man as the seer, is deliberately reversed. Mrs Pringle cannot possibly have the liberty and freedom of vision attendant upon madness because she has no soul, no imagination. The best that she can think to do with her inspired insanity is to undo her knitting. Mr Pringle's interior world is as limited and sterile as that of his wife: he dreams only of a brick wall. His entire imaginative capacity is reduced to one immense and impenetrable solid surface:

> He says it is a most vivid dream. Here is this wall in front of him he says, so long that he can't see the end of it, and so high that he can't see either its top or its bottom. (p. 29)

Saunders has established two levels to the action of his play. On the surface, we witness the endless and irresolvable bickering and incongruity in the relationship of the Pringles. Their memories do not correspond and their conversation is fragmented in the extreme. All aspects of their external world are similarly distorted, so that even walking the dog can be an abnormal experience:

> PRINGLE: In any case, Fido is not really fond of walking, you know ... Not since he died. (p. 18)

This is the world subsequent to the death of Fred, it is a product of the loss of human feeling. The second level of the play is an internal one, seen through the reported thoughts of the protagonists. Their internal worlds are either a chaos of violence and paranoia (Mrs Pringle), or are bland and characterless (Mr Pringle). The two levels of Saunders' play support and explain one another. It is no surprise that the world of the Pringles is one in which Fred must be re-killed on a daily basis, as the occupants of that world do not have the emotional or spiritual capacity to make him live. Saunders comments:

> Life is dead for them [the Pringles] ... they sacrificed the ability to feel amazement or happiness or compassion years ago - by killing Fred ... Now they are automatic creatures, and their conversation can aspire to nothing higher than the most threadbare inanity ... They are both to blame - I think we all are.[28]

From his experience of *The New Tenant*, Saunders realised that "the stage in its entirety could be used to make very complex statements - changes to the visual and physical communicate the author's world-picture".[29] This realisation is put to use in *Barnstable*. The gradual collapse of the set expresses, for Saunders "the breakdown of our world - that world which is empty, and caves in on itself, mirrors the inner realm of the characters".[30]

The stage directions read like those of a traditional piece of old style realism. The action is set in an upper-middle class drawing room, with its standard collection of armchairs and French windows. The characters are presented initially as ones typical of this genre. Charles Carboy and his wife, Daphne, are the stock Master and Mistress of the house: he is preoccupied with his gardening and she with her flower arranging. The Reverend Wandsworth Teeter is the usual benevolent, absent-minded clergyman and Helen is the stereotypical beautiful daughter with a secret cause for distress. During the course of the bland daily interactions of the family it becomes apparent that a series of very bizarre events is taking place around them. A character called Barnstable - whose identity is never disclosed to us - is outside shooting thrushes in the garden. We discover that he spent the previous week shooting squirrels. The audience is never informed why this should be so and the characters neither seem to notice nor to care about his irrational behaviour. Throughout the play Barnstable begins to take on metaphoric overtones, an expression of that wanton destruction which goes on, seemingly inevitably, around us. Moreover, the house is visibly collapsing around its occupants. The maid appears at various intervals in order to inform the household of further deterioration. In the second half this deterioration is made visible on stage.[31] The house, by the end, has collapsed entirely and the occupants go about their daily routine amongst the rubble.

> The characters are untouched by their predicament. The two-dimensional Mr Carboy advocates a bit of traditional stiff upper-lip. He either overlooks the falling house altogether and reverts to his favourite topic, gardening, or he dismisses it with casual rationalisations:

---

[28] Letter to the author, 3 August 1992.
[29] Letter to the author, 27 July 1993.
[30] Letter to the author, 27 July 1993.
[31] This technique of collapsing the set as a reflection of wider existential decay or madness can be traced from Saunders to Ionesco, back to Artaud's *The Spurt of Blood*.

> Let us keep our heads. My assessment of the situation is this: the sun appears to have gone temporarily out. That is all. I have no doubt that it will be remedied in the due course of time. Meanwhile, we must do the best that we can to behave as Englishmen.[32]

His daughter Helen is too preoccupied with her trivial relationships with those around her to appreciate the significance of the deteriorating house. She is obsessed with whom she knows and their opinion of her. Many of her speeches evolve into incantations of names and emotions, for she is caught up in a private and trite world of names and relationships. She is the perfect Ionescan mannequin, gibbering jargon as her world makes manifest its insanity :

> Harold has asked me to go riding with Peggy and Oscar this afternoon, to meet Cyril and Betty and then play squash at Robin's; but Robin is playing croquet at David's with Meryl and Cedric. (p. 14)

The Reverend Wandsworth Teeter is similarly blinkered by his own religious rhetoric. To almost every comment or every situation his unthinking response is that it is God's will. His moronic faith in a limited God is essentially no different from Carboy's belief in reason. To the news of the collapse of the east wing he iterates a standard, unthinking platitude: "All is for the best, my child. All is as it should be. To be otherwise is impossible" (p. 21).

The movement of the play is towards oblivion. The characters remain static, trapped in their self-defeating preoccupations, as the house continues to crumble. The greater the extent of the devastation, the smaller and more fatuous the concerns of the characters. Thus, towards the end of the play, surrounded by the debris of their former home, Carboy and his wife become obsessed with the menial:

> CARBOY: I'm worried about the lease on the house.
> DAPHNE: I'm worried about that vase.
> CARBOY: I'm worried about whether to clean my teeth before shaving and then wash, or wash before cleaning my teeth and then shave. (p. 11)

On such a note, the play ends: Helen continues to repeat her lists of names, Teeter assesses everything as an expression of the divine plan, and Carboy, apparently oblivious to the ruins around him, suggests that they all sit down for cocoa. This is a very clear succinct expression of an absurd vision: both man and environment have collapsed through the weight of their own insanity, and such is the extent of the madness that neither seems to even notice the other.

---

[32] James Saunders, *Barnstable* (London: Samuel French, 1961), p. 17.

The world of the last three plays is an illogical one, deprived of a sense of causality or purpose. In *Committal* and *Alas, Poor Fred*, neither language nor behaviour is driven by any internal dynamic but merely follow their own impulsive patterns. Both plays end from where they began and the whole random series sets up again. In *Barnstable* the overriding pattern is based on dis-integration: the deterioration on stage mirrors the decay of the internal world of the characters. The twin patterns of circularity and disintegration reflect the abandonment of reason, the insanity which masquerades as the real world. In *A Slight Accident* the absurdity inherent in the human condition is presented in a simple allegory.

Penelope's ordered, predictable routine is shattered by an unusual combination of circumstances which result in the death of her husband: she just *happened* to have picked up a gun; it just *happened* to have had a bullet inside it; and she just *happened* to have aimed it at her husband. Though distressed by her husband's death, Penelope is more concerned by the realisation, brought on by this "slight accident", that life is capricious and cruelly unpredictable. Life cannot possibly be governed by external agents (be they rational or supernatural) if a momentary and innocuous incident can have such devastating consequences, throwing the existence of one person into complete disarray and terminating that of another:

> PENELOPE: Life isn't to be taken seriously. It's just a cheap imitation of a television play ... The most incredible things happen suddenly, out of the blue, as though they've been stuck in by accident, and the last act doesn't resolve a thing. Life is an affront to the intelligence, I realise that; badly written, badly acted, and apparently not directed at all.[33]

An opposite view - that life is governed by logical forces and can be dictated to - is held by Penelope's friends, Rodger and Camilla. It is Rodger, the ultra-rationalist, who finds Penelope standing over her husband's corpse, and unhesitatingly accuses her of murder. He insists that, by adhering rigorously to reason and routine, unpredictable occurrences and accidents will become obsolete:

> Look at me. Am I ever ill. No. Why? ... Because I stick to routine. Because I have every action catalogued, right down to the blowing of my nose at set intervals. (p. 158)

For Rodger, life is regimented into a logical sequence of premeditated and accountable events:

---

[33] James Saunders, *Neighbours and Other Plays* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1968), p. 168.

> I keep a book. A sort of manual of running instructions. I've worked it out over the years. What's childhood for if not to learn one's routine? By the time I was twenty I knew precisely what I'd be doing any minute of the day. It's the only way to live safely. Behind the facade, no, the bastion of habit, of routine, anarchy lurks, waiting to spring. (p. 159)

The experiences of Rodger and Penelope express two fundamentally different views of reality, the rational-material and the absurd: "the jungle of infinite possibility, where every step is into unknown country" (p. 159). Camilla, a neutral observer, *happens* to pick up the gun with which Penelope shot her husband, and *happens* to aim it at Rodger. Rodger's instantaneous and unexpected death demonstrates clearly that the ultimate reality is the absurd one, entirely devoid of reason or motive. Even rationalists like Rodger, who ensure that every second of their lives is caught in routine, cannot escape the vagaries of our illogical existence. The anarchy which Rodger refutes is a reality precisely because, as Penelope warns him, life is "not directed at all". In effect, the whole of life is a series of "slight accidents" - of inexplicable and arbitrary events which constitute the calamity of existence - and which add up to the over-all slight accident which is life itself.

The cyclical patterning of *A Slight Accident*, and of all of the 1959 plays, reflects more than the futility and irrationality of experience. For Saunders, the cyclical structure is the prevalent manifestation of a dream-motif which is central to his works. Circularity is one of the defining characteristics of dreams:

> Dreams defy logic, nothing is straight-forward, there's no cause-and-effect. Dreams are very important to my plays ... theatres are, after all, dream-places.[34]

According to Saunders, it is the responsibility of the dramatists to reflect on stage a dream reality:

> You could say the absurdist is not only trying to write dreams, but trying to *dream* plays. In other words, I suppose, he tries to nudge his engine source nearer the unconscious end of the psychic spectrum.[35]

He compares the absurdist (himself) with a psychoanalyst "trying to bring dreams into the light" for the purpose of ascertaining the truth of the human situation.[36]

Dream reality, in the 1959 plays, is reflected in the central predicament of the characters:

---

[34] Letter to the author, 2 January 1992.
[35] Letter to the author, 2 January 1992.
[36] Letter to the author, 2 January 1992.

> Absurdism can be said to be the stuff of dreams. In dreams the protagonist is led along, he seems not to be in charge, things happen *to* him and he is more often trying to escape than trying to "direct".[37]

The dream reflects life in microcosm, and with fidelity. The arbitrary and uncontrollable sequence of events which make up the dream represent life divested of its fragile rationalist or teleological gloss. Man, in dream, as in life, is little more than flotsam caught in a chaotic and short-lived flux of images, impressions and experiences. Such is the situation of the Carboys in *Barnstable* or Wall in *Committal*, they find themselves trapped within the larger, spontaneous current of events which they have lost the ability or the desire to control. Indeed, Penelope, at the end of *A Slight Accident*, laments that she is locked into a situation which she cannot influence and which does not appear to have any conscious or rational direction.

Saunders' plays, which suggest a loss of meaning, and the deterioration of all causal or rational interconnections between things, focus on the futility of language, the recognised instrument for the communication of meaning. In bringing to the surface the inherent banality and illogicality of language, Saunders challenges the assumption that accepted linguistic structures, based on apparently logical grammatical and syntactical laws, reflect our own 'meaningful' reality. In his study of *The Bald Prima Donna*, David Grossvogel isolates at least a dozen ways in which Ionesco devalues language, including repetition, non-sequiturs, platitudes, inconsequence and parody.[38] Saunders employs a wide array of techniques, many of which are borrowed from Ionesco, in his assault on language.[39]

In a world in which sequential time yields to circular time, and continuity deteriorates into arbitrary and unrelated events, language is used to create a fragile sense of chronology, or momentum. Characters compensate for this lack of continuity by constructing fragile linguistic patterns, based upon repetition or the obsessive reiteration of words or phrases. In *Barnstable*, the recurrence of a the phrase, "I'm worried about", provides a brief and frenetic sense of continuity to the disjointed lives of the characters:

> CARBOY: I'm worried about the moles.
> DAPHNE: I'm worried about Charles, he worries too much.

---

[37] Letter to the author, 2 January 1992.
[38] David I. Grossvogel, *Four Playwrights and a Postscript* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1962), pp. 51-6.
[39] According to Taylor, it is in his handling of the cliché that Saunders most obviously resembles Ionesco. See Taylor, p. 199.

> CARBOY: I'm worried about the lease of the house.
> DAPHNE: I'm worried about that vase. (p. 11)

Another device for fabricating a sense of continuity - or for merely trying to create an impression of momentum - is the relentless repetition of a single word. Pringle awakens from his vacuous dream of a brick wall and, aware of the gathering silence around him, yet incapable of remembering the previous conversation, resorts to a manic word listing: "Come come come, yes or no. Come come. Come come come. Come come. Yes or no" (p. 11).

Pringle strives for a same sense of continuity through the endlessly mechanical rearrangement of those limited verbal formulas which he has been granted:

> Fred. No moustache. Ham sandwich. The promenade, Sandwich, 1925 ... Clean-shaven. Ham sandwich. 1925. The promenade, Sandwich, Fred. No moustache. Ham sandwich. (p. 12)

The pattern is repeated in *Barnstable*:

> HELEN: It was absolutely idiotic of me. I don't know how I can ever forgive myself for being do absolutely idiotic ... and fatuous. And inane, absolutely fatuous and inane. I feel absolutely idiotic. (p. 14)

Repetition and rearrangement create the impression of blind proliferation. The momentum of the repetition accelerates to the point of exhaustion. In the above example, the same words are arranged in every pattern possible. When a pattern has been tried the character stands dumb, waiting for a fresh verbal clue which might trigger off its next linguistic onslaught. In this respect the characters resemble computers which have been supplied with only a very limited amount of data. The data available is either repeated or re-patterned until all possible formulas of repetition or sequencing have been tried. This is evident from the following monologue by Pringle. Like a computer, he assimilates the rudimentary 'meaning' of the verb *to disagree* and calculates the various linguistic formulas which can be used to communicate this. Incapable of spontaneous thought, his monologue must be based on the circular repetition of the formulas which he has processed:

> We've obviously reached a point of disagreement. That's what it seems to me ... I'm sorry, but that's the way I see it. I can't see it in any other light. We hold different views on the matter. You think one thing and I think another, that's the way it appears to me. We hold divergent opinions on the subject. That's putting it in a nutshell. (p. 6)

In the following sequence, it is individual words, as opposed to a basic idea, which are reformulated: the Pringles rearrange and repeat the words *odd*, *almost* and *funny* until they are emptied of meaning and the language-data runs out. The characters end up contradicting themselves entirely and their repetitions are rendered senseless:

> MRS PRINGLE: It must be funny to be cut in half ... Without any warning. Funny ...
> PRINGLE: I don't think so. *Odd.* I'd say. Decidedly *odd.* I wouldn't say quite *funny.*
> MRS PRINGLE: I meant *odd.*
> PRINGLE: Oh, yes, I see. I thought you meant funny. You meant *odd.*
> MRS PRINGLE: I mean *odd,* yes.
> PRINGLE: Well, yes, most odd, I'd say. Most decidedly odd ... And *almost* funny, you know, when you think about it. Not quite, but *almost.*
> MRS PRINGLE: No ... No, I don't think so. Not funny. *Odd.* I think, very odd, but I don't think quite funny. (p. 3)

Having rearranged and reformulated their restricted verbal constructs, the characters must either repeat themselves again or cease to operate. Penelope's statement that "language is so limited" (p. 154) does not express the human's awareness of its own limitations but the machine's acknowledgement of the insufficiency of the language-data with which it has been programmed.

In many respects, Saunders' plays of the late 1950s and early 1960s might be regarded as his apprenticeship in the absurd, integrating into his own works those linguistic and structural techniques with which he had become familiar through his exposure to Ionesco.[40] *Return to a City* is perhaps the first of his maturer absurd plays and in it he enters the territory of Beckett. Though he borrows consciously from Beckett, Saunders attempts to develop a personal vision of the human condition:

> Early in the '60s I wanted to write something that was more unique to myself, not derivative of Ionesco ... 'Return to a City' was the result ... I realise that it is Beckettian, and the influence is not always deliberate ... I had known Beckett's work for a few years and admired it ... until that time, I had favoured Ionesco, his outlook correlated with my own.[41]

---

[40] After *A Slight Accident*, Saunders' absurdism was to become less derivative. Despite this, during the remainder of the 1960s, he "wrote a number of blatant imitations of the Ionesco style". *Who Was Hilary Maconochie?* (1963), for instance, is a second duologue in the style of Ionesco, and owes a great deal to *The Bald Prima Donna.* Saunders regards these short, derivative pieces as important to his development after 1961: "Like any craftsman, I did not want to lose sight of my sources. I had to return, on occasions, to basics, so that I could develop from them". Letter to the author, 12 March 1993.

[41] Letter to the author, 12 March 1993.

6.3 "nothing connects with nothing": *Return to a City* (1960)

The post-nuclear setting of this play takes Saunders' work into the territory dominated by David Campton (whose *Four Minute Warning* was produced in the same year). The difference in their treatment of the nuclear issue emphasises the essential difference between the absurdist proclivities of the two writers. For Campton, the nuclear theme is viewed in terms that are entirely social: it is a political evil which must be eradicated. In *Return to a City*, however, and again in *The Pedagogue* (1963), the fact that the nuclear age could be a reality is for Saunders suggestive of a Godless, senseless world:[42]

> 'The Bomb', the threat of nuclear war, was a real threat but was also the symbol of a state of mind: that something sinister, released by sinister, faceless creatures, could at any time render ordinary everyday life absurd ... What value human life when it could so easily, so casually, be extinguished? ... The bomb, in fact, cried out for absurdist treatment, and was treated as such - in our different ways - by David Campton, as well as myself.[43]

As in *Endgame*, the post-nuclear background is necessary as a symbol of man's absurd isolation, it is not a subject of importance in its own right.

The setting is not too dissimilar from that which Clov sees from the window of the hollow skull of his room. The only outstanding feature of the rocky, level wastes is:

> *What was once the drawing-room of what was once a house. It has the appearance to be expected of a room which has been open, via wall and roof, to the weather for many years. The furniture is sticks and stones.*[44]

The stage is divided into three essentially static acting areas. The decaying house is inhabited by the Woman and her invisible dog (we are never told if the dog exists or if it is merely a product of her confused imagination). The second area, of rocks and rubble, is occupied by the Woman's husband (the Second Man) and the First Man, who have only just met whilst scavenging for food. The third area contains the Traveller and the Girl, who have come in search of the Traveller's old

---

[42] In *The Pedagogue* a teacher delivers a lecture on the importance of Christian faith, and expounds at length the virtues of the "Supreme Being" which "has our best interests at heart; which takes care of us". This supreme being is, as far as the pedagogue is concerned, responsible for the order and the harmony which exists in the world. As the lecture continues the audience becomes aware of a growing unease within the class: random lights flash outside; distant explosions punctuate the flow of words; the increasing restlessness of the students. The final words of the pedagogue, a reassertion of his belief in the divine authority, are drown in the roar of an atomic explosion.

[43] Letter to the author, 3 February 1993.

[44] James Saunders, *Neighbours and Other Plays*, p. 115.

home. The three areas are distinct from one another, and it is only in the final scene (or fragment) that all of the characters meet. In this way, the focus is placed not upon the interactions of the various groups, but upon the solitary and independent voices of the characters, who are insulated in their designated and limited space. The symbolically broken setting becomes the perfect context for what is, in essence, a montage of isolated voices, each of which registers its response to its absurd predicament.

The first voice which emanates from the dereliction is that of the Woman. Her situation, and her response to that situation, is exactly that of Winnie in *Happy Days*. Stranded amongst the decaying remnants of her former home and life, she remains stalwart in her determination to ignore her horrific circum-stances, and clings, instead, to the superficial comforts of a constant verbal onslaught and to an absurd adherence to social rituals. Her monologue begins with her pampering and feeding the invisible dog. With that duty completed, she turns to the task of keeping her 'home' tidy. She plucks from the rubble a broken brush with which to scrape the filth from her walls:

> I must clean the walls. That's what I'll do. I wonder why I didn't think of it before. I should have done it long ago, I can see that now ... Dirty, they all are. (p. 116)

In the final fragment, when the Second Man brings the First back to meet his wife, the Woman resorts casually to the grotesque, and in the circumstances entirely inappropriate, platitudes of polite conversation:

> WOMAN: And a friend - How nice.
> FIRST MAN: Charming, charming.
> WOMAN: Visitors are always welcome.
> FIRST MAN: You are too kind.
> WOMAN: Not at all. (p. 136)

An audience is made suspicious of Winnie's apparently forced good nature: there is something desperate and self-deceptive about her unendingly civil chatter. Saunders places his audience in a similar relationship with the Woman. Only briefly does the flow of her monologue get interrupted. She stops talking and, suddenly conscious of the profoundly telling silence around her, she resumes her word flow:

> Listen ... Listen ... Nothing ... No sound ... Nothing ... You start to scrub a wall, the noise of it fills your ears, and then you stop ... and there's nothing. No sound ... But there *were* sounds once. (pp. 116-17)

Here Saunders reproduces the situation which is at the heart of Beckett's plays. All of Beckett's characters force themselves to keep talking as a last desperate attempt to block out the ultimate reality of the everlasting silence and nothingness which encroaches in on them. The mouth in *Not I* is certainly the most succinct expression of the need to talk. Like the old woman of the monologue, who said not a word in seventy years and was then possessed by a neurotic need to speak, the mouth spews out an avalanche of words with which it hopes to ward off the terrible silence:

> cheeks ... jaws ... tongue ... never still a second ... mouth on fire ... stream of words ... in her ear ... practically in her ear ... not catching the half ... not the quarter ... no idea what she's saying ... imagine! ... no idea what she's saying! ... and can't stop ... no stopping it ...[45]

Estragon and Vladimir are, of course, driven by their need to talk and actively prompt one another into *any* form of conversation. In one passage they admit to hearing the 'voices of nothingness', describing these whisperings in terms of leaves rustling together:

> ESTRAGON: It's so we won't hear ... All the dead voices.
> VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.
> ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
> VLADIMIR: Like sand.
> ESTRAGON: Like leaves ...
> VLADIMIR: They whisper together.
> ESTRAGON: They rustle.
> VLADIMIR: They murmur.
> ESTRAGON: They rustle.[46]

It is indeed revealing that this metaphor reappears in Saunders' play, during the Woman's monologue:

> A slight wind had the effect of *moving* the leaves, and the thousands of leaves each, rubbing and slapping against its neighbour produced - a sound. (p. 117)

The Woman represents one aspect of the Beckettian reaction to man's predicament: she attempts to guard the mind from inescapable reality through an ultimately insane verbosity which, in the case of Winnie or Pozzo, is associated with an incongruous attention to decorum. However, there is another side to

---

[45] *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 380. The narrator in *The Unnamable* is typical of Beckett's characters: "I have to speak, whatever that means. Having nothing to say, no words but the words of others I have to speak". Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1959), p. 48.

[46] *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 57.

man's reaction. As opposed to activity and talk, some of Beckett's characters crave perfect stasis. Inertia and passivity are easier than to hope for change or to resolve to take action. Like Krapp, they would rather sneer at, and ultimately dismiss, the past, than accept a present which demands effort and involvement or a future which promises purpose and constructive action. Maddy and Dan in *All That Fall* exemplify this reaction. Dan admits that his main ambition in life is absolute inertia:

> Sit at home on the remnants of my bottom counting the hours - till the next meal.[47]

Maddy reiterates the sentiment more forcefully:

> Would I were lying stretched out in my comfortable bed ... just wasting slowly, painlessly away.[48]

Bermange expressed this essentially Beckettian sentiment very clearly in Nathan's monologues in *Nathan and Tabileth* in 1962. However, its most powerful reworking is by Saunders in the character of the Second Man. After the Woman's monologue, the action focuses upon the two men on the rock pile. The Second Man submits to the horror of his situation and adopts a profound pessimism. He, too, lends himself to monologues in which he excludes the possibility of a past and lives entirely, reluctantly, in a painful present:

> My dear, dear fellow, I am full of thoughts for the future. I am a mass of apprehensions. What do you expect of me? Each time I breathe ... My dear fellow, each time my lungs collapse I find myself thinking; very well; after this it will be necessary to fill them up again. If possible. Unless I stop, unless I choose not to, unless I - resign. Who drives my heart, tell me that? I from second to second ... Who do you think holds me in the vertical position? *I. My* muscles. I work them, I tell them to hold on, from minute to minute, from second to second, year in and year out ... The future? Ha! My dear fellow, the future is this: My wife ... has a *bone* for me! (p. 122)

The Second Man is in keeping with most of Beckett's characters who live literally from moment to moment, constantly reminding themselves, like Hamm, to breathe and to think. Their reason for doing this is that the alternative, oblivion, might be even more painful than living. Yet, despite this, the Second Man cannot resist the self-destructive urge towards stasis:[49]

---

[47] *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 190.
[48] *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*, p. 181.
[49] The need for stasis is evident in Ionesco's work: the Man in *The New Tenant* wants only a room crowded with furniture so that he may sit, untouched and unseen, in the midst of it.

> I'll tell you my ambition. To stand, here, where I am, with my eyes closed, until I wish to sit down, and then to sit, there, with my eyes closed, until I wish to lie down, and then to lie, there, and sleep until I can say: Here I am at the beginning of another day; only a few hours and I shall be at the end of this day too, somehow, I don't know how, somehow ... That's all I ask. Take your complications elsewhere. (p. 142)

Between the two poles represented by the Woman and the Second Man, Saunders displays a variety of other, less developed, reactions to man's hopeless predicament. The First Man, for example, prides himself on what he calls his "realistic optimism", which, essentially, is a form of delusion, a rationale for inactivity. The 'optimism' is based on the facile belief that life always restores its own balance, calamity and joy are meaningless as life will reach its own natural equilibrium and simply "go on":

> First, if it gets worse ... If it gets worse it gets worse. But *then,* it can either get worse, again, or get better, or stay the same. My dear chap, life goes on ... Two. If it stays the same. The same. It stays the same. Life goes on ... (p. 133)

The Girl, on the other hand, accepts whatever happens to her. She refuses to question or even think about the circumstances of her life and lives in ignorance, untouched by life's experiences. Hence, when the Traveller finds her amongst the debris, she follows him without question, and obeys his every instruction.

For one fleeting instance the play admits the potential for hope. In the final fragment the montage of voices is disrupted as each of the characters moves towards the house. The first piece of extended interaction in the play occurs with the arrival of the two men and the subsequent passages of grotesque social chatter with the Woman. The tone shifts abruptly when the Traveller interrupts, announcing himself as the son of the Woman and the Second Man. The Woman's inane chatter ceases, and she attempts to recollect the intruder, to piece together the shattered fragments of her memory, and thereby forge a meaningful link with her past:

> I have memories. Not many, but some, odd scraps. It wasn't always like this ... Trees, do you deny there were trees. The world full of things, full. I only have to remember them ... Wait. (p. 141)

Though the repeated non-sequiturs earlier in the play reflect a meaningless world where memories are merely "odd scraps", there is hope in the Woman's speech, as she tries to establish a rational continuity in her life. However, the Woman's

attempts come to nothing in the face of the mass dislocation of experience around her.

The Second Man, by contrast, violently rejects any allegations of a coherent past. The pain of admitting to a personal history is too great and he clings desperately to the numbness of his present displacement. He rejects the Traveller, who brings with him the possibility of memory and placement in existence, and he chastises the Woman who *tries* to consider a positive alternative:

> We've lived long enough without birds. Why complicate things? There are no birds, there are no trees, we have no son, still we live. *Still. What do you want?* To get them back, to lose them again? We live, that's enough. Let that be an end of it. (p. 141)

Hope is ultimately crushed beneath the weight of ignorance, apathy and fear represented by the Second Man. The Traveller and the Girl are rejected, and the three return to their distorted and inconsequential conversation.

Return to a City is a statement of man's present life rather than a fiction of a possible future. The play's bleakness reflects the difficulties of facing up to the arbitrariness and potential lack of meaning of one's immediate existence. The nuclear setting provides a means of making these considerations comprehensible. Nonetheless the tone of the play is not uniformly serious. It is inter-cut with episodes of a pathetic slap-stick humour which bring about a hollow laughter. The humour is most evident in Saunders' rather Ionescan handling of physical objects. Stage objects proliferate symbolically as each of the characters expresses an hysterical need to accumulate. The Second Man brags because he *possesses* three-quarters of a house with half a roof. The characters become over-excited when they discover broken objects amongst the rubble: a brush, a bone, a starting-handle to a car. The two men, for instance, are childishly eager when they find a packet of cigarettes which still has its cellophane wrapper, its foil and its box: "Three covers. The complexity of it ..." (p. 119).

None of the objects serves a useful purpose: the house can provide no shelter; the brush is without bristles; the cigarettes are useless without matches; the bone is bare and the starting-handle is defunct without a car. Whereas the objects were once connected with their environment, and part of a large web of relevant associations, they now lie meaningless and useless. In *The Chairs*, the old couple rely desperately on their invisible chairs, regarding them as useful and necessary for their meeting. Yet in their illogical world the chairs have no place, and they begin to stack up and to smother the old people, whose attempt at associating the objects with their environment, in the hope of making sense of that environment, merely increases their distress. The same thing happens in Saunders'

play. The two men are excited at the prospect of using the handle. Eventually, they realise the futility of their attempt: what is the use of having objects when there is nothing with which to associate them? Their laughter is a thin disguise (rather like the forced garrulousness of the Old Couple) for the miserable realisation that "nothing connects with nothing":[50]

> *He cranks the handle. After a moment the* SECOND MAN *begins to shake. The* FIRST MAN *starts laughing again ... He stops turning and they both give themselves over to their laughter, which engulfs them prostrates them, leaves the* FIRST MAN *sobbing bitterly and the* SECOND *motionless except for an occasional heave, head dropped onto his shoulders.* (p. 129)

The vaudeville humour of attempting to start a car without having the vehicle present is pure Chaplinesque absurdism. The image of turning the starting-handle in a repetitive, circular motion, like that of the blind Hamm wiping clean his spectacles, clearly exemplifies the absurd predicament.

6.4 The absurd vision fulfilled: *Next Time I'll Sing to You* (1962)

Next Time I'll Sing to You represents the high point of Saunders' absurd writing and embraces many of those concerns and techniques with which he had been experimenting in previous works. Saunders' inspiration for the play came from reading Raleigh Trevelyan's book, *A Hermit Disclosed*, which describes the life of the Essex hermit Jimmy Mason. It is obvious from his rewriting that the life of the man - his personality, the events of his daily routine - held no interest for him. Instead, Saunders interprets the hermit symbolically. He finds in Mason a metaphor for man: isolated, full of grief, unsure of purpose.[51] He uses Mason to explore various existential considerations: that man is not free; that it is impossible for one person to understand another; that the only real truth of life is the fact of death. Raleigh Trevelyan comments on the central difference between his relatively straight-forward account of the hermit's life and Saunders' abstract reinterpretation:

---

[50] This sentiment is borrowed from *The Fire Sermon* in *The Waste Land*. T.S. Eliot, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), p. 70.

[51] Hinchliffe elaborates upon this idea: "if Mason, the subject of the play, was really forgetting the world and forgotten by the world, and if no one was aware of his existence or his history, how could he be said in any real sense of the term to exist". Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *The Absurd* (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 85. Anderson also discusses Mason's metaphoric significance. See Michael Anderson, 'James Saunders', in *A Handbook of Contemporary Drama*, ed. by Michael Anderson and others (London: Pitman, 1972), pp. 395-6 (p. 395).

> To me any human being, however obscure, is interesting, when one is able to glimpse into his 'soul'. This is what I tried to do with Jimmy Mason: look into his secrecy and his paranoia, to understand why he wanted to withdraw from the larger community. To do this I had to piece together the facts of Jimmy's life ... looking at extracts from his diary and reports by people who knew him ... I was flattered that James Saunders based his play on my book, but he did something which I had not the courage to do ... interpreted Jimmy as a symbol for all of us, and used him to investigate the senselessness of our existence. He picked upon a number of points which I had not recognised - that we are all locked in ourselves - flies in a spider's web.[52]

Saunders is fully aware of the extent of his reworking of Trevelyan's original:

> My play makes a metaphor from Raleigh Trevelyan's case study ... The human condition is compressed into this tramp, this hermit.[53]

In the first act, Saunders suggests the aimlessness of life in the rambling, fragmented form. Four characters, Meff, Dust, Lizzie and the Hermit (Mason) arrive on an empty stage. Saunders tries to create the impression that their behaviour is natural and spontaneous: they are, as it were, actors who have turned up for a routine rehearsal. They are self-conscious about being actors, unable to function without a structure created for them by the writer. Thus they are uncertain of what they should be doing before the writer arrives. They occupy their time in playing games; telling jokes; arguing:

> LIZZIE: Well, anyway, here I am. When do we start? ... I said when do we - ?
> MEFF: We've started.
> LIZZIE: What do I do then?
> MEFF: What you're doing.
> LIZZIE: But I'm not *doing* anything.[54]

Initially, the characters appear as free-moving and as spontaneous as Jellicoe's in *The Sport of My Mad Mother*. However, as the minutes pass and Rudge, the writer, still has not appeared, their game playing and random behaviour becomes desperate: Lizzie is distressed because she is having to create a new situation for herself, a reason, as each minute passes; Dust becomes anxious because he cannot think of more ways or means for propelling himself round the stage.

---

[52] Raleigh Trevelyan, letter to the author, 30 August 1993. See also Raleigh Trevelyan, 'Foreword', in James Saunders, *Next Time I'll Sing to You* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963), pp. vii-viii (p. viii).
[53] Letter to the author, 2 January 1992.
[54] James Saunders, *Next Time I'll Sing to You* , p. 12.

A pattern begins to materialise out of the random activity. Comments made casually by the characters indicate that the apparent spontaneity is held in a rigid and predetermined framework, the play itself:

> DUST: Night after night the same circular dialogue, round and round we go. (p. 5)

The characters are frustrated at having to undergo the same rituals every day. There is no way out, no fresh alternative:

> MEFF: You said that yesterday.
> DUST: Today I *mean* it.
> MEFF: You said *that* yesterday. (p. 17)

A tension is established between a sense of randomness, on the one hand, and, on the other, a limiting, preordained structure. Characters/actors seemingly act impulsively and freely, as they have nothing to do until their writer arrives. However, they are well aware that every nuance of speech and behaviour is part of a written framework which they enact on stage each day. They are doubly lost: not only is their behaviour meaningless to them, but this meaningless belongs to a pattern which they must adhere to.

The characters are sensitive to their predicament and attempt, without success, to break out of the structure of the play:

> DUST: Do something, say something! Ask my opinion on something.
> MEFF: On what?
> DUST: Anything, anything!
> MEFF: Which, er - I've run out.
> DUST: If there's a pause now I'm done for. (p. 18)

They even begin to question the usefulness of a play which is nothing but a collection of repeated non-sequiturs:

> DUST: What does he expect to come *out* of this nightly rigmarole? Does he think one night we'll reach a conclusion? Doesn't he realise that it's always the same, that it can't be otherwise? (p. 6)

When the organiser figure arrives in the second act he promises to give shape to the activities of the characters/actors. He announces his responsibility to find a 'meaning' to the life of the Hermit and to construct a play, a coherent framework, around this. Within the neatly defined perimeters of the play, the characters will have a clear role, an ordered context:

> RUDGE: All I want is to understand the purpose of existence; of one man - not of the population of Liverpool, you understand, just of one man. (p. 73)

The search for meaning, which occupies the remainder of the play, proves fruitless. Rudge's presence is ineffectual. He remains, static, in the centre of the stage, preoccupied with the Hermit's life. He recognises the hypocrisy of attempting to establish a clear framework for the life of another when his own life is without structure or clarity:

> if a man chooses to live out four decades immured in a hut in a state of poverty, filth and isolation he is in a sense not alone; for we are all that man. (p. 20)

His monologue becomes more complex and self-involved, as he begins to recognise in the Hermit's existence a metaphor for his own life and, by extension, that of mankind. Simultaneously, the other characters drift pointlessly about the stage, engaging one another in short-term conversations or bouts of horse-play, awaiting sustained instruction and direction from their creator. Their situation is increasingly without hope: Rudge slowly reaches the conclusion that the whole dramatic exercise is a waste of time:

> RUDGE: There's only one thing worth understanding ... and that is that I am a mind locked in twelve hundred grammes of brain locked in a quarter of an inch of skull and the only key to this prison is death. (p. 45)

Rudge submits finally to the futility of his task. His ultimate admission is a tragic one, that it is not only the Hermit's situation that he is exploring, but his own. In their confusion and isolation, each one of the characters is no better than the Hermit:

> RUDGE: We are locked in ourselves, as he was. We live out our lives in a little dungeon, as he did. Only for most of the time we forget about it. We have other things to do. We nod, touch hands, gesticulate, dance the ritual dance. But he you see, had no such pretence ... The manner of his existence was a posing of the question we manage to avoid: who or what is it that is so obsessed with me that he makes it necessary for me to live out my long life in this dark slowly-decaying cell to no apparent purpose? (p. 47)

The question is rhetorical, for there is no guiding force which is "obsessed" with man. Rudge has relinquished responsibility for his creations, admitting to the impossibility of ascertaining meaning or purpose, in the same way that Saunders has and - for the play is inherently a statement of this - in the same way that 'God'

has. Without guiding force or larger purpose man becomes, inevitably, the product of his immediate, arbitrary sensations:

> What is man but the manifestation of countless diseases and disorders, physical, mental and psychosomatic, each one struggling for supremacy? (p. 38)

In this case, life is no more than a structureless chaos trapped between the only controlling principles of birth and death:

> Just three things it all boils down to ... making an entrance, making an exit and filling in the time in between. (p. 59)

As a final mocking commentary, Dust, echoing the words of Shem, says of Rudge, his creator: "Even a God has his limitations" (p. 75).

The play does not end, it fades out. Rudge, confused by, and lost within, the labyrinthine considerations of his monologue, his abortive search for meaning, wanders into the darkness which surrounds the stage. The characters grow weary of their games and walk away, disillusioned and exhausted. The Hermit remains as much an enigma as ever and those who wished to explain his life admit to the impossibility of their task. The characters simply cease to function and drift off stage, aware that the play, and their place within it, never really got started.[55]

Between *Dog Accident* (1958) and *Next Time I'll Sing to You* (1962) a complex evolutionary process takes place: Saunders' dramatic aesthetic develops from an unformed and elementary absurdism, reliant, in *Dog Accident* and *The Ark*, on conventional forms which echo Sartre, to the complicated presentational techniques of *Return to a City* and *Next Time I'll Sing to You.* Saunders' vision of the human condition, which underpins the gradual structural and stylistic changes between 1958 and 1962, remains relatively static:

> We did not know the word "absurdism" when I began to write, but that's what I was trying to find - from the beginning - a pure,

---

[55] The *Contemporary Dramatists* series is the only journal or critical account to give Saunders developed coverage. In the first three editions the reviews of Saunders' work, written by Jonathan Hammond, are extremely cursory, and fail to look at any of the plays written before *Next Time I'll Sing to You.* Furthermore, Hammond's review is glaringly inaccurate. He writes of *Next Time I'll Sing to You*: "By the dramatic means of other characters investigating him, the play examines sympathetically the various pressures, family, psychological and economic, that made the man choose a life of isolation". Hammond's discussion of the play fails to take into account the fundamental structural experimentalism and its metaphysical connotations: instead he describes the play as if it were a piece of standard realism. On a purely superficial level, the play does not even look into the "pressures, family, psychological and economic", indeed, Saunders is not strictly interested in the hermit's life at all. See Jonathan Hammond, 'James Saunders', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, 2nd edn, ed. by James Vinson (London: St James Press, 1977), pp. 692-5. In the most recent edition, Tish Dace is more accurate in his description of Saunders' plays, nonetheless, the review itself continues to be extremely short (less than a page long) and barely considers any of the pre-1962 works. See Dace, pp. 462-5.

> absurd voice ... The straightforward techniques of 'The Ark' appear very different to the abstractions of 'Next Time' - but, in fact, the two plays are saying the same thing - they are bound together by the same pessimistic vision of life.[56]

He is loyal throughout to his pessimistic conviction that mankind is doomed: abandoned by his creator; alienated from his immediate environment; forced to endure a restricted existence in pain and perplexity. Whereas Shem (*The Ark*) is capable of verbalising and railing against his predicament, the fragmented and repetitive structures which contain the Hermit (*Next Time I'll Sing to You*) present that predicament in vivid and immediate terms, and so express the absurdity of life with greater power and clarity.[57] Saunders recognises that, in many respects, the absurdist plays of the early 1960s represent, for him, the purest type of expression:

> the hallmark of my theatre after 1960 was a form which, like a mirror falling from a great height, breaks, splinters, shatters into hundreds of shards, of different sizes and degrees of sharpness ... On one [shard] the onlooker may catch an eye reflected, on another a mouth - meaningless and perhaps unrecognisable in themselves, but when perceived in their shattered entirety the onlooker might see someone he knows, or thinks he knows ... This is as close to "truth" as I can get.[58]

---

[56] Letter to the author, 2 January 1992.

[57] Many of Saunders' plays of the late 1960s and 1970s return to the structural flexibility and presentational style of *Next Time I'll Sing to You*. In *Triangle* (1965), for instance, he explores the tension between the Actor, who strives to define himself independent of the author, and his "inky-fingered God", who has him caught firmly in a preordained network of words and actions. *A Scent of Flowers* (1964) and other, later, plays such as *After Liverpool* (1973) and *Games* (1973), use a linguistic framework which, in its extreme fragmentation, becomes a metaphor for the incoherent inner worlds of the speakers.

[58] Letter to the author, 2 January 1992.

PART III

ABSURDISM AND THE MAINSTREAM

The playwrights of the mid-sixties were in a position to make use of the dramatic vocabulary developed by the Absurdists, the audience of the mid-sixties had learned to accept that vocabulary.[1]

[1] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Pelican, 1980), p. 431.

CHAPTER VII

THE INTEGRATION OF ABSURDISM INTO THE PERMANENT VOCABULARY OF DRAMATIC EXPRESSION

The late 1960s and early 1970s witnessed wide-scale developments in British experimental theatre, particularly in the field of absurdism. In order to account for these developments we must look beyond the margins delineated by the 'absurdists' considered in this thesis. The playwrights discussed in the preceding chapters are the central and most thorough advocates of a form of English 'absurdism', but they are not the *only* writers of their generation to express an interest in, or to have affinities with, the absurd. Throughout the early 1960s a sub-current of English writers looked to the techniques and the ideas put forward by the French absurdists and by those English playwrights (particularly Pinter) who were influenced by the French avant-garde. These writers were not interested in absurdism in its entirety, nor were they influenced by it to the same degree as were many of the English 'absurdists'; nonetheless, as absurdism filtered into the wider dramatic consciousness these dramatists, some of whom had been social realists, began to experiment with its devices. A fragmented absurdism was integrated into the theatrical climate, thereby enhancing the flexibility and experimental bias of many of the plays produced in the early and middle 1960s.

In 'Beyond the Absurd', the final chapter of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin acknowledges that absurdism had, to a large extent, been "absorbed into the main stream of development" and become "part of the everyday vocabulary of playwrighting in general" by the closing years of the 1960s.[1] His evidence to support this claim is limited. He mentions the dream-sequence in Osborne's *Inadmissible Evidence* and Bond's *Lear* and the Beckettian colouring of Stoppard's early plays.[2] 'Beyond the Absurd' is a short yet misdirected chapter: it is rather a celebration of the importance of absurdism (as demonstrated by the incorporation into the wider dramatic context of its mechanisms) than a detailed account of *how* the integration process came about, or a comprehensive description of those authors who made use of absurd devices. Another problem with Esslin's argument is that it fails to recognise that in many cases the use made

---

[1] Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Pelican, 1980), pp. 430-1.
[2] Esslin, pp. 431-4. This conclusion is in keeping with Esslin's assertion that "A label ... is not a binding classification; it is certainly not all-embracing or exclusive. A play may contain *some* elements that can best be understood in the light of such a label, while other elements in the same play derive from and can best be understood in the light of a different convention". Martin Esslin, 'Introduction', in *Absurd Drama* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 7-23 (p. 9).

by English playwrights of those techniques generally associated with absurdism is cosmetic and superficial. The dream-sequences in Osborne's *Luther* or Whiting's *The Devils*, for instance, are temporary aberrations from a strictly external reality: they are intended more as insights into the psychological make-up of the protagonist than as extended attempts at experimenting with an internal reality. Bernard Kops uses dream-sequencing in *The Hamlet of Stepney Green* and *The Dream of Peter Mann*, but the structure and the language of these episodes remains loyal to external reality: narrative is sequential and chronological and conventional causal and spatial laws are rigorously adhered to. There exists, nonetheless, a number of playwrights (overlooked by Esslin) who adopted absurd motifs to test the boundaries of a realistic theatrical convention which they found insufficient. Even though these writers may employ absurd devices in a partial or limited manner, they remain truer to the spirit of the absurd than do Osborne, Bond or Kops. David Rudkin states that:

> By all accounts, I am not an absurdist ... my vision isn't entirely negative and I don't share their nihilistic inclination ... [However] the absurd represents for me a reservoir of dramatic resources - a wealth of resources through which to escape a small-minded realism ... a restricting realism.[3]

Absurd devices recur as part of the dramatic vocabulary of a number of English playwrights: David Rudkin, Giles Cooper, Johnny Speight and Clive Exton represent the nucleus of this group.

7.1 Internal reality: dream and fantasy

Giles Cooper was one of the pioneers of internal reality in the British theatre.[4] By 1956 he had written nine plays for radio, taking advantage of the aural medium to create a flexible form of drama which, structurally, approximates to the absurd. According to Irving Wardle and Donald McWhinnie, his most consistent supporters, Cooper's plays fall into two broad categories. The first category comprises plays "which use a naturalistic opening as a springboard into a fantastic development".[5] The progression towards fantasy demands a elasticity of form and pliability of plot which suggests the rhythms of internal reality. The

---

[3] David Rudkin, interview with the author, 16 March 1994.
[4] Appendix IV discusses *The Other Animals* (1948) by Ewan MacColl: anticipating Cooper's works, this was one of the first British plays to use many of the techniques associated with the theatre of the absurd.
[5] Irving Wardle, 'Introduction', in *New English Dramatists* 12, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 7-21 (p. 18).

second category found in Cooper's work explores "the private fantasies of a character in a 'real' situation".[6] This exploration usually involves a movement directly into the dream world of the protagonists.

Of Cooper's fifty-three plays, it is the first 'type' identified by Wardle, the apparently orthodox realistic piece which develops in a fantastic direction, which is most recurrent.[7] Though these plays have "the speed and logic of dream ... overtones of dream and surreal changes of rhythm", action is not internalised.[8] Cooper does not advocate dream reality as an alternative to the external. Many of these plays are little more than light-hearted, romantic pieces or sentimentalised adventure stories. *The Owl and the Pussycat* (1953), the first of his 'fantasies', and *The Disagreeable Oyster* (1956), a later attempt, demonstrate their innocuous quality.

In *The Owl and the Pussycat*, a timid bank clerk, James, and a bored secretary, Amelia, meet one another during a day trip to the sea-side. At a loss for company, they agree to share a rowing boat and spend an hour paddling on the lake. From this fairly conventional opening an increasingly fantastic adventure unfolds. The two characters leave the perimeters of the lake and, oblivious to their environment, row across the English channel. Upon reaching France, they become embroiled in international espionage. As a result of his inadvertent involvement in a diamond-smuggling intrigue, James is transformed into a glamorous playboy adventurer. At the end of the play, with the intrigue resolved, the two return to England, larger-than-life heroes, and very much in love.

Cooper's tale of the little man who discovers in himself the capacity for courage and dignity, is, in thematic terms, conventional. The play's interest lies in the close parallelism between self-discovery and style. As the characters move deeper into their fantastic adventure the style becomes increasingly fluid. The mundane, realistic introductory scenes open out into a rapidly moving dream-like sequence in which the disregard of temporal and causal laws is matched by a mutability of character, as James and Amelia change from the normal and work-a-day into super-heroes. A series of adventures, each more outlandish than the last, befalls the characters with incredible speed, so that the actual plot movement becomes secondary to the volatile stylistic flux.

---

[6] Wardle, p. 18. The distinction between the two categories of Cooper's plays is also made by McWhinnie. See Donald McWhinnie, 'Comic Mask, Cruel World: the Plays of Giles Cooper', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 16 (1975), 51-4 (51).

[7] Between 1949 and his death in 1966, Cooper wrote twenty-five plays for radio, twenty plays for television and eight plays for the stage. These are listed in Louise Cleveland, 'Giles Cooper', *Theatrefacts*, 4 (1975), 3-14.

[8] Cleveland, 6.

In *The Disagreeable Oyster*, the mouse-to-man movement of *The Owl and the Pussycat* is reversed. Mervyn Bundy, a minor office clerk, is depicted as a man of great arrogance. When he is sent to London on a business trip, with all expenses paid for by his company, he decides to take full advantage of his situation. The opening is unremarkable: Bundy takes a first class seat on the train, books into a respectable hotel, and makes a display of his newly-acquired wealth. These realistic opening sequences are elusive, and Bundy's decision to spend an evening on the town precipitates the movement into a surreal landscape. Sitting in an all-night cafe, deliberating on how to spend the firm's money, Bundy vociferates his disgust at a group of drunken women. Their response prepares the way for the shift from the 'real':

> AG: Just like a man.
> EM: They're all the same.
> VI: Hate to see us enjoying ourselves.
> AG: All they want us for is work.
> EM: Cook three meals a day.
> AG: Wash up with never a hand.
> VI: And the laundry.
> EM: Mend their socks and shirts.
> AG: And carry them around for nine months.[9]

This series of complaints becomes ritualised, evolving into a chanted lamentation of the difficulties of motherhood, which ranges, in nine sentences, from domestic to reproductive responsibilities. The women chastise Bundy not, as one would have expected, for rudeness, but for perpetuating the species. The dialogue, though idiomatic, is a grotesque version of the normal: each sentence is pared down and economical, becoming a distillation of the essential bitterness which the speaker wishes to communicate. The dislocation of the real world is intensified throughout the remainder of the play. The women transform into a pack of harpies who tear Bundy's clothes from his body and eject him into the street. He seeks asylum in a nudist colony, where he is obliged to play naked bridge with a group of civil servants. The action continues to unfold as a series of dream-images which culminate in Bundy purchasing religious vestments from a bell-ringer and returning home, humiliated and chastised by his bizarre experiences.

The Owl and the Pussycat and *The Disagreeable Oyster* are highly-stylised, the shift from the real to the surreal is propelled by a dream-logic and dream flexibility. Written early in the 1950s, both plays anticipate similar techniques in the plays of Antrobus, Simpson and Bermange. Despite stylistic

---

[9] Giles Cooper, *Six Plays for Radio* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1966), p. 103.

resemblances to the absurd, these plays are altogether more conventional. Both works are dictated by a sentimental optimism which is alien to most of the English 'absurdists': James and Amelia discover their true strengths as a consequence of their adventure; Bundy learns his lesson, and becomes a 'better' man. An unconvincing romanticism glosses both works: Bundy comes to respect the wife to whom he returns at the end of the play; James and Amelia fall in love. The plays in the second category identified by Wardle, the sustained fantasy rooted in a real situation, share neither the vague didacticism nor the romantic glibness.

The Sound of Cymbals (1955) and *Under the Loofah Tree* (1958) are closer to the absurd. In these plays the action is internalised as the characters attempt to escape into their fantasy worlds in order to avoid a reality which they find unfulfilling or threatening: their mental impulses and perceptions are allowed to usurp rational and external developments. In *The Sound of Cymbals* three children are forced to spend a holiday with their aunt and uncle, an egocentric drama critic and his authoritarian wife. The strict regime to which the children are subjected (bed by eight o'clock, restriction to the nursery, quietness at all times) proves intolerable, and they respond by withdrawing into a fantasy world. The children assume the roles of prisoners-of-war, the victims of a merciless Nazi command. The fantasy takes on the rhythms of a very real and destructive fear: as the children tunnel to escape from their Nazi captors sections of the house are ruined; during their flight into the street a window is broken and a milk-float, swerving to avoid them, is upturned, and the driver is killed. Further destruction is prevented when the youngest child, Hugo, terrified by his new situation, returns to the familiar boundaries of his role as a little boy.

In *The Sound of Cymbals*, the fantasy reality of the children percolates into an unsatisfactory 'real' situation, and eventually overwhelms it. Fantasy reality brings with it a genuine menace, as the children prove incapable of controlling the situation which they have created, a situation which results in the death of an innocent bystander and their own horrified capitulation. In *Under the Loofah Tree*, the tone, which favours the comical, provides a thin disguise for a profounder feeling of menace. As the protagonist moves further into his imagination he becomes increasingly aware of the limitations of his 'real' situation, and strives to reject the 'real' permanently. Sealed hermetically in his bathroom, Edward Thwaite avoids the reality and responsibilities of the outside world by indulging his fantasies. Whilst taking his bath, Edward is interrupted by a series of visitors who knock on the door, wanting an audience. The first is his wife, who needs help with the housework. The second is his young son, seeking entertainment. A rent-collector and a milk-man arrive, demanding payment.

These interruptions illustrate the ordinary and unsatisfactory nature of Edward's life, one which he wishes to evade. In place of the 'real', Edward constructs a series of episodes, events from an imaginary life. In the first episode he projects himself as a great lover, a man of immense charm, sought after by the female kind. This episode blurs with another, in which he is a popular television celebrity; after which he becomes a successful Oxford student, a peer of the realm and, finally, a war hero.

The rhythm of this play closely resembles that of *The Sound of Cymbals*, in which the flux of events becomes more surreal and fantastic in accordance with the extent to which the protagonist shifts from the external world. The final episodes, in which Edward is deep in his fantasies, are a pastiche of rapidly moving images and fragments of dialogue: the headmaster recollects his academic success; he finds acclaim in the House of Lords; he is decorated for his war effort. The rhythm of Edward's fantasy is finally broken by repeated hammering on the bathroom door, and by the protestations of his wife and creditors. He accepts the return to the 'real' begrudgingly, and responds with a great deal of hostility. His language has acquired its own erratic, staccato cadence which stands in stark contrast to his eloquent fantasy-self. The implication of the play's short and somewhat bitter end is that the return to a despised 'real' world brings with it another sort of avoidance, one consequent to an over-zealous imaginative escapism: the onset of madness.

Despite his stylistic affinities with absurdism, it would be an over-statement to label Cooper an absurdist. He *never* loses sight of the real world: all of his plays are anchored in a contemporary, social reality from which his characters, through their fantasies, are trying to escape. He never actually attempts to redefine reality, to posit the internal world as a serious or constant alternative to the external one. The rejection of the external world as manifested in the plays of Beckett and Ionesco is based on a fundamental distrust of *all* of the precepts of that world, a hostility towards the all-embracing laws of rationalism and causality which have shaped the creation of social institutions and moulded man's perceptions and self-identity. By rejecting these external precepts and all of the modes of understanding and self-understanding associated with them, man may reach a clearer and less adulterated version of himself and his relationship to his environment. Cooper's aesthetic rests on an altogether less complex intention. The focus of his disgust lies in the social. Like most of the post-1956 dramatists his works centre on social commentary, and the temporary indulgences in an

internal world act as a foil to illustrate the limitations of the social world.[10] Each of Cooper's reviewers agrees with McWhinnie's observation that "his plays are a chronicle of the sickness of society".[11] The dreams of most of Cooper's protagonists - Edward, for instance - illustrate the crushing power of a routine and social conditioning which have defeated modern man, making him withdraw from a grey and lifeless social reality into a vivid and fulfilling fantasy 'reality'. Fantasy becomes a protective mechanism, compensating for the restrictions of the external and the social.[12] Though some of his works communicate a sense of despondency which is not evident in many of the plays of the pre-1956 era, this is a particularly social despair, a sustained lament for a society which has reduced man to the status of insect.[13] None of Cooper's plays expresses despair on an abstract or metaphysical level: his bleakness may suggest criticism, but never nihilism.

None of the dramatists considered in this chapter has explored internal reality, or used a flexible style to suggest internal rhythms, to the same extent as Cooper.[14] Nonetheless, Donald Howarth's *Sugar in the Morning* (1958) represents an important step in the English theatre towards the internalisation of action. Howarth, a social realist, and member of the original Royal Court Writers' Group, examines, in his first play, the metaphoric potential of the stage:

> Osborne had popularised the talky, angry format, which was fairly static, very representational ... I was excited by what he had to say, and considered myself an 'angry' ... [however] I wanted to be different, to break away from strict realism ... to use the stage metaphorically, to represent in its broken appearance the lives of the characters.[15]

---

[10] See J.W. Lambert, 'Introduction', in *New English Dramatists* 7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 7-13 (p. 12).

[11] McWhinnie, p. 53. See also Mervyn Jones, 'Introduction', in *Modern English Dramatists* 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 7-18 (p. 13).

[12] The social commentary implicit to all of Cooper's radio works is even more explicit in his later stage plays. In *Everything in the Garden* (1962), for instance, a group of suburban house-wives escape the numbness of the social routine by turning to prostitution. After an initial (and superficial) outrage, their husbands eagerly accept their wives' activities as a welcome source of extra income. The middle aged family of *Happy Family* (1966) find the wider social responsibilities of work and marriage so barren that they opt to return to a childhood fantasy of nursery games and baby-talk. Fantasy and internal reality are used, in these plays, to comment on the socially and economically defined limitations of the external.

[13] Wardle compares Cooper's characters to dung-beetles, as materialism and consumerism have reduced them to the status of scavengers. See Wardle, pp. 18-19.

[14] Cooper was the only dramatist discussed in this thesis who recognised and exploited the potential of radio for communicating the internal life of an individual. Like Beckett, he used the medium, which necessarily dispenses with the visual, to explore the possibilities of the inner-monologue. See McWhinnie, pp. 51-2.

[15] Donald Howarth, letter to the author, 23 February 1994.

Sugar in the Morning is the meeting point between the angry young realism of Osborne and, to a lesser degree, the theatre of the absurd. The central character, Douglas Kendrick, is an eloquent, educated malcontent reminiscent of Jimmy Porter. Kendrick's complaints are not aimed at social injustice or political malpractice, but at the smallness and meaninglessness of life, the patterns of obscurity and futility which dictate the rhythm of existence. Commenting on another character, he perceives the "void in her immediate present and an emptiness inside of her": this is true of all of the characters in the play, who endure a lonely and broken life without expecting more.[16] For Kendrick, humanity has become sterile and lost:

> I detest these people and the lives they lead. I despise them all. They're futile, lazy, unexceptional killers of time. They are without stature, pride, wit, their virtues are acorns, they're a pigmy lot ... if I could be God I would ignore them out of existence. (I.37)

The play's absurdity lies in its manipulation of the structure to *present* the dominant theme. As opposed to a chronological unfolding of events, in the manner of *Look Back in Anger*, this play adopts the rhythms of an interior reality, ignoring all spatial and temporal conventions. The set becomes the prevailing poetic image. As opposed to a static and realistic representation, the set is a juxtaposition of incongruous elements:

> *The stage is a confusion of scenery and furniture. There, part of a wall, here, some of a stair-case, to the left, a carpet, to the right, a ceiling, a dormer window in a roof, we are in the cellar, a faded brocade curtain, a contemporary curtain. The pelmets are missing, lost behind a tree in the hall.* (p. ii)

As in Adamov's *The Invasion*, the erratic and visually confusing set is an image of the chaos of living, a manifestation of the fragmentary and disconnected nature of experience.

Kendrick, the occupant of a decaying urban boarding house, surveys with distaste his fellow inmates (a depressed landlady, a loveless married couple, a retired pensioner). His commentary takes us into the present, past and future of the house, not in an obvious, sequential sweep, but in abrupt and unexpected movements. Half way through a sentence, we may be taken ten years into the future, or back to the past. These leaps between the years contribute to the impression of fragmentation, random units of experience are shuffled together in the distorted and incoherent pattern of life. The only discernible movement which emerges from this eccentric temporal flux is one of decay and

---

[16] Donald Howarth, *Sugar in the Morning*, unpublished, I.26.

disintegration. Episodes from the mundane lives of the main characters reveal the erosion of hopes and the shattering of dreams. Kendrick's contention that "past, present, future, they're all the same" (II.23) proves to be valid: sadness and emptiness dictate each stage. Towards the end of the play Kendrick realises that he, too, is locked within the pattern of futility, and with the knowledge that he cannot escape, that he is also lost, life becomes finally intolerable:

> The present is insistent, it stays with me and holds me like a clip on a splenal artery, release it and you die ... For most of us the present is made bearable by rosy memories of the past; memory is a trick, it tricks us into wasting our time, like hope and faith. You can theorise, you can imagine that your ears have sight and say you saw the sun make a yellow noise - but it doesn't make a damn difference to a damn thing, does it? Whatever we think or feel the present is still there - can you hear it? - and your heart is in the core of it - can you feel it? - living? People are disgusting. (II.31)

The tension between the 'angry' school and an interior reality of the absurd is pronounced. On one level, the play is another foray into bedsit land, its miseries and problems overlooked by an articulate Jimmy Porter figure. On a deeper level, *Sugar in the Morning* examines life in the broadest sense, as a monotonous and barren collection of experiences, an assembly of pain and disappointment which ends in obscurity and death. The rhythms of the interior or dream-reality dictate this portrayal of life, the fragmented temporal and causal sequencing, and the metaphorically discordant set, conjoin to create a dominating image of life's meaninglessness.

In the late 1950s, after *Sugar in the Morning*, internal reality remained the dramatic territory of the English 'absurd'. Early in the 1960s, however, it was taken on by another outsider, a social realist, Clive Exton. Exton's early works belong firmly in the realms of external reality, indeed, Taylor refers to them as essays in minute realism.[17] *No Fixed Abode* (1958), for instance, provides a detailed and meticulously realistic study of a group of vagrants spending the night in a doss-house. *Where I Live* (1960) focuses on an old man who is rejected by his children and forced to endure his dying weeks alone. Exton claims that by their very nature the recurrent motifs of his early works, those of alienation and isolation, suited a dramatic presentation which moved away from the external and the realistic:

> "No Fixed Abode" brought over more or less what I wanted to say about these men separated from their families, their societies, themselves ... [however] the observational or the objective-

---

[17] John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* , 2nd rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 246.

> realistic style was restricting ... bloodless ... I wanted to try something which would allow me to get underneath these characters or inside them ... and to find out what was *really* going on there.[18]

The technique to which Exton turned in the early 1960s, as a vehicle for expressing man's loneliness, was the monologue, each one dominated by a powerful central metaphor which reflects the situation of the speaker. A collection of short plays, written in the early and middle 1960s, uses the monologue form to explore the confusions and obsessions of an alienated protagonist. Though other characters appear, they remain superfluous to the action, existing on the periphery of the speaker's consciousness. The first of these monologues, *The Close Prisoner* (1962), is essentially a prolonged reminiscence by a middle-aged man, Henry, which is interrupted on occasions by an enigmatic director. The play moves away from external reality in order to examine the inner-chaos of the speaker.

During Henry's narration of the formative events in his life, actual biographical circumstances become secondary to the exploration of an all-pervading metaphor. As an adolescent, Henry awoke to discover that his abdomen was changing into steel:

> Well - it didn't stop there. It just kept on growing - it was moving up - all over my chest and back - the skin was going all hard and smooth.[19]

There is a symbiotic relationship between the actual and the metaphorical in Henry's monologue, one explains the other. Each stage of his transformation is closely allied to an event in his private life: rejection by his family, the disappearance of his girlfriend, his failure to find stable employment. In effect, the metaphor delineates the stages of his social and emotional alienation. The monologue concludes with Henry's complete transformation into a man of steel, that is, a thing untouchable and impenetrable, something which is entirely self enclosed, and, as such, the ultimate expression of his solitude.

The movement of a second short play, *The Boneyard*,[20] repeats that of *The Close Prisoner*. The estrangement of the speaker, P.C. Miller, from his environment, is explored through a central image. During a routine inspection of a graveyard, Miller is convinced that he is addressed by a stone effigy of Christ on the cross. He returns regularly to the statue, seeking in its prophetic

---

[18] Clive Exton, letter to the author, 7 March 1994.
[19] Clive Exton, *The Close Prisoner*, unpublished, p. 8.
[20] This play was produced in 1966 though, according to Exton, it was written earlier in the 1960s. Letter to the author, 7 March 1994.

exclamations an explanation for, or escape from, his mundane life: the loss of his wife, his unpopularity with his colleagues, dismissal from his job. At the end of the play, there is a shift in the nature of the metaphor; a final demonstration of the speaker's loneliness. In the final scene, when Miller turns in desperation to the statue, it also abandons him. The weighty declarations which it uttered at the beginning of the play turn into nonsense babblings ("It is written that the seagull does not need sandals ... How long is a piece of rope?"), which culminate in final and lasting silence.[21]

The internal monologues favoured by Howarth and Exton provide windows to the subconscious world, the audience is invited to look in and to perceive the fears and paranoias which haunt the subconscious vistas of modern man, and to explore those fantasies through which he compensates for his isolation in the real world. In the plays of David Rudkin and Johnny Speight, on the other hand, fears are externalised, and expressed in the predatory and territorial rituals through which man tries to establish a tenuous bond to a threatening and alienating existence.

7.2 "the sinister and inexplicable sub-reality": the influence of Harold Pinter

According to Rudkin, there appeared in the late 1950s and early 1960s "a group of plays spawned from Pinter ... short, menacing pieces full of mysterious persecutors and innocently dazed victims".[22] For Rudkin, these plays had "shadowy resemblances to absurdism", but it was "a watered down absurdism ... one more suited to British tastes":[23]

> Pinter's plays follow the same pattern ... that which is normal and secure suddenly becomes out of joint, no longer secure or even recognisable ... This usually takes the form of a person being persecuted in familiar surroundings, as if our own homes or work places decide one day to be hostile to us ... Pinter and his imitators, of which I was one, never leave little England, our familiar world of bus queues and cinemas ... reality is altered temporarily, but never cut off from what we know.[24]

The two writers in whose works the influence of Pinter is most obvious are Rudkin himself and Johnny Speight. Their shorter plays follow closely the model put forward by Rudkin. Each of the four Pinteresque plays written by

---

[21] Clive Exton, *The Boneyard*, unpublished, p. 50.
[22] Letter to the author, 19 May 1993.
[23] Interview with the author, 16 March 1994.
[24] Interview with the author, 16 March 1994.

Rudkin and Speight communicate, through a slight distortion of external reality, "the sinister and inexplicable sub-reality which exists beneath the run of events, life's routine".[25] What is normal and everyday acquires, for a short time, a grotesque and threatening colouring, challenging the mental stability or self-perception of any unsuspecting bystander. Neither Rudkin nor Speight posit an alternative reality, in the manner of Beckett or Ionesco, and their attention, focused on shocks and sinister events, is never wholly absorbed in absurd abstractions.

Speight's *The Compartment* (1961) begins in an apparently familiar world, the carriage of a commuter train on its way to Manchester. The only occupant ("a middle aged man ... he could be a barrister, or a judge"[26]) reads his newspaper. Speight introduces an outside agent into this ordinary and unthreatening world, an intruder who functions to challenge the security of the older, respectable man, to involve him in a territorial struggle. At the start, the young man is fairly innocuous, insistent in his attempts to make polite conversation, keeping up the chatter with casual observations about the compartment and the view from the window. The older man is monosyllabic in his responses, barely disguising his irritation at these constant interruptions.

In the second half of the play the young man acquires increasingly threatening proportions as he builds up a ritual of persecution, and mercilessly torments his travelling companion. After his futile attempts to establish a dialogue, the young man turns to direct aggression. He challenges the older man's authority by opening windows and demanding that he stop smoking. The old man, the bourgeois conformist, capitulates easily when his fragile territorial dominance is challenged:

> YOUNG MAN: It's a nasty habit ... a nasty habit ...
> MAN: Yes ...
> YOUNG MAN: Say it ... Say it's a nasty habit ...
> MAN: It's a nasty habit ...
> YOUNG MAN: Say smoking is a nasty habit ...
> MAN: Smoking is a nasty habit ... (p. 20)

The ritual persecution culminates, in the same manner as Albee's *The Zoo Story*, in moral dismantling, the stripping of the conformist of all of his layers of civility and dignity. The young man produces a gun and forces the old man to debase himself, to imitate musical instruments, and to scrabble on the floor, barking like a dog. The ritual of humiliation complete, the young man surrenders his gun (which is merely a toy) and, offering his best wishes, vanishes into the

---

[25] Johnny Speight, letter to the author, 2 December 1993.
[26] Johnny Speight, *The Compartment*, unpublished, p. 1.

crowded platform. With the disappearance of the enigmatic persecutor, everyday reality returns, covering all traces of the abrupt digression into a sinister world.

The ritual of persecution which informs *The Playmates* (1962) is more complex. Initially, the aggressor is a young man (quite possibly the same man as the previous play). He moves from door to door selling "jokes" and tricks. Through forced good humour and veiled threats he manages to cajole one of his clients, a woman, into believing that her private house is, in fact, a boarding house. Once the outsider has entered the other's territory, the situation is reversed, and the hunter becomes the victim. The young woman develops an overly enthusiastic interest in the young man's products and urges him, despite his obvious reluctance, to demonstrate each in turn. The woman transforms into the real aggressor, systematically using each of the samples to humiliate the interloper. The young man leaves, abandoning his games, overcome by fear and confusion at the woman's behaviour.

In these plays Speight returns to the early territory of Pinter, a world where, according to Henry Raynor: "There are no motives, no explanations, no rationalisations".[27] In Speight's plays, as in Pinter's, the sudden and unexpected dislocation of reality results in a foreboding and unfamiliar world: where an apparently ordinary train-journey or a child's game become sinister rituals of persecution. This vision of a precarious and capricious reality owes something to the absurd. External laws are momentarily abandoned; routine and predictability are twisted slightly into a disturbing new pattern. However, as Raynor goes on to point out, the 'absurd' elements of Speight's plays spring, not from an absurd vision of the human condition, but from a desire to mystify and thrill the audience:

> The ideas were fashionable at the time when it was avant garde and exciting to offer allegiance to "The Theatre of the Absurd", but Speight produced his genuine shocks and frissons.[28]

Rudkin's first play, *No Accounting for Taste* (1960), also experiments with the idea that everyday reality can become, with only the slightest modification, something cruel and tormenting. In this instance, the busy world of an account-

---

[27] Henry Raynor, 'Johnny Speight', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 496-8 (p. 498). The epithet "no motives, no explanations" is associated traditionally with Pinter's works. Speight is sensitive to the similarity and assumes a vocabulary, when describing his own works, which self-consciously resembles that of Pinter: "Of course Pinter was an influence ... like him, I see a world of people who do not understand one another, who threaten one another ... Many people live in a world of their own making, and act on impulse to commit acts and behaviour that is far from clear to most of us". Letter to the author, 2 December 1993.

[28] Raynor, p. 498.

ants' office becomes the hunting ground of a bloodthirsty predator. There appears, at first sight, to be nothing out of the ordinary in the office of Crown, Blood and Mendelssohn. As secretaries come and go, carrying messages and accepting telephone calls, their activity is watched over, and directed by, Mr Mendelssohn. As the play progresses, however, a feeling of menace becomes pervasive. Mendelssohn is an exacting boss, he keeps back various secretaries after hours, with incessant demands that they do extra work for him; receptionists are sacked without warning, and are never seen nor heard of again. Towards the end of the play, the senior secretaries, Miss Jones and Miss Miles, begin to complain about the rapid turnover of staff. Their disquiet is increased by the appearance of strange red patches on documents and by the smell of cooking which emanates from the partner's room. Jones and Miles vanish in their turn, and the play ends with Mendelssohn contacting the local employment agency, asking for a fresh body of staff.

Rudkin writes of *No Accounting for Taste*: "most of it was borrowed from Pinter ... the idea of persecution by a vague yet potent force ... something evil beneath the routine, waiting to rear up and trap the unsuspecting".[29] In this instance, the grotesqueness of the situation and the overtly menacing atmosphere suggest Kafka also. In another unpublished play, *Children Playing*,[30] the exaggerated Kafkaesque elements disappear and Rudkin takes his audience into a world which is unequivocally influenced by Pinter. The play begins as a fairly innocent rendition of a school-trip taken by a group of inner-city children. Into the world of the children, that of good humoured mischief and adolescent teasing, Rudkin inserts two outsiders, Apeman and Judy, occupants of the same hostel. The two men, their motives unknown, begin a regime of terror on the children, disrupting their games, intruding upon their private conversations. The psychological terrorising takes on horrific proportions at the end, as one of the children is isolated by the two adults and, for no apparent reason, tortured.

Though the fad for sinister plays, based mainly around the idea of persecution by unknown forces, owed much to Pinter, it did not necessarily originate with him. As early as 1950 Cooper's first stage play, *Never Get Out*, experimented with some of those techniques later made popular by Pinter and Speight. Set in a decaying house in a deserted country village, the play unfolds as a duologue between two mysterious characters, an elusive conversation in which both speakers attempt to disguise from the other their identities and motives. Catherine is a middle-class housewife who has recently fled from her husband;

---

[29] David Rudkin, letter to the author, 14 March 1994.

[30] Although this play was not produced until 1967, it was written at the beginning of the 1960s. Interview with the author, 16 March 1994.

Harvest is a violent and illiterate man who has been hiding in the house as a hermit for over a year. The play commences with the unexpected arrival of Catherine and Harvest's desperate attempts to protect his terrain:

> HARVEST: Don't scream; I have a knife, see?
> CATHERINE: What do you want?
> HARVEST: I don't want anything that I can think of. No don't move.
> CATHERINE: Who are you?
> HARVEST: That's asking. Sit down on that box there. Go on now, do what I tell you.
> CATHERINE: Why should I?[31]

The territorial ritual which ensues contains overtones of Pinter, the rhythms of evasion and procrastination colour the dialogue as the characters circle round one another, searching for vulnerable points, for a means of establishing a temporary dominance:

> HARVEST: What's your name?
> CATHERINE: Mind your own business.
> HARVEST: I am minding it. I want to know your name.
> CATHERINE: I don't choose to tell you.
> HARVEST: Choosing is it? I rather fancy the choice is mine.
> CATHERINE: Why do you want to know it?
> HARVEST: It is a matter of interest to me to know the names of the people that come here. Not that anyone does.
> CATHERINE: An empty sort of kingdom. (p. 5)

The tension within the house is exacerbated by events outside of it: Harvest reveals that the village is being used as a bombing range by the air-force, and the conversation ensues to the sound of explosions, and the threat of imminent death.

Two themes emerge from the elusive duologue, the prevalent one concerns the dangers of conformism. It is obvious that both characters, whatever their background, are non-conformists: Catherine, we assume, has rejected the despotism of her husband, and Harvest has run away from the institutionalised violence of the army, the prison or the asylum. Their non-conformism has left them without an external structure on which to hang their identity, hence their incapability of defining themselves or of accepting the help or even the presence of the other. When seen within the context of the vague allegory of conformism, the noise of the bombs exploding outside acquires a metaphorical significance. The bombs are the emissaries of the omnipresent power-holder, sent to restrict the movements, and ultimately destroy, the dissidents.

---

[31] Giles Cooper, *Never Get Out*, unpublished, p. 4.

The second theme is that of man's isolation. The characters endure a double tragedy: they cannot operate within society and, as the play demonstrates, they cannot function outside of it. Towards the end, as the bombs begin to fall, a fragile friendship develops between the two. When the aircraft pass over, allowing a momentary respite, the unity dissolves. Harvest comments that:

> Everyone is themselves all alone in a cage of arms and legs and ribs and you can't get into anybody else's cage any more than fishes can nest in the trees. (p. 70)

This idea is as central to Pinter as it is to the absurd. Both characters are doomed to be entirely alone. The responsibility for shaping their own fate is too great for either to accept. Man all alone will (according to Cooper) turn in on himself, and this explains the commonality of behavioural traits between the characters in all of his plays: they are anxious and erratic, prone to fits of despondency and self-destructive violence. The play concludes with the two going their separate ways, locked in mutual dislike. Catherine has decided to return to the ultimate isolation of a loveless marriage, willing to accept "the solitude, the silence" (p. 36) of wedlock, and Harvest is determined to search for another hole to hide in.[32]

The rituals which inform the works of Cooper, Speight and Rudkin are, predominantly, battles for territory, struggles between frightened individuals who confirm their precarious identity by quashing or usurping that of another. In the plays of Genet, and of his imitators in England, the ritual is universalised, and becomes the only way in which man is able to place a fragile structure on an existence which is essentially random and chaotic.

7.3 The influence of Genet's theatre of ritual

The ritual theatre of Genet failed to infuse into the fabric of English drama in the late 1950s and early 1960s, despite limited expressions in Jellicoe's *The Sport of My Mad Mother* and Grillo's *Gentlemen I....* There exist, nonetheless, two plays which experiment with the integration of ritual drama within a realistic framework. The first of these is Forbes Bramble's one-act play *The Dice* (1959). Bramble dispenses with narrative, using the focal image of a pair of dice to communicate the mood and the central idea. Three men, imprisoned for unspecified political crimes, decide to create in their insular and self-enclosed

---

[32] Thematic similarities between Cooper and Pinter are discussed in Wardle, pp. 17-18. See also Irving Wardle, 'Comedy of Menace', in *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and others (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 86-91 (p. 87).

world their own legal and moral codes. The dice become the arbiter of right and wrong: he who scores highest at any throw is accepted as temporary power-holder. Owing to the status accorded to them, the dice assume omnipotent proportions ("unbribeable ... non-human ... divine"[33]) and the men create their own ceremonies around them in order to court favour. Brambles monitors the sacralisation of these inanimate objects in terms of the elaborate rituals which surround them. The liturgical tone of the addresses to the dice, and the intricate and repetitious nature of the prisoners' actions when throwing them, demonstrate a loss of individuality, a transformation into unquestioning automatons:

> OLD MAN: An answer we would beg of thee.
> SECOND PRISONER: An answer, worthy dignity.
> OLD MAN: Tell us where the blame lies.
> SECOND PRISONER: Inanimate, passionless, inhuman, divine.
> (p. 35)

Ritualisation serves a double function. In the first instance, it illustrates man's need for a divine arbiter, an external influence which provides the present situation with a meaningful context, and through which man can relinquish responsibility and blame for his own actions. Moreover, Bramble demonstrates that man, through a blind and unthinking ritualism, can change from individual to machine: the three prisoners create for themselves a second and more binding form of captivity.

Despite Taylor's assertion that *The Dice* represents English theatre's closest rendition of Genet's *Deathwatch*,[34] the resemblance between the two plays has its limitations. Whereas Genet's characters are archetypal, often elemental, Bramble's characters are, to begin with, accurately drawn and idiosyncratic individuals. Though Genet's plays are suffused with the patterns of ritualism, the ritual of Bramble's play is implemented at the end as an inevitable consequence of the deification of the dice. Rational or 'meaningful' language in Genet's plays is replaced by interconnecting strands of poetry and incantation, Bramble, on the other hand, never devalues language. In *The Dice* discursive thought and moments of overtly philosophical discourse dominate: though incantation supplements the language in the final scenes, it never replaces it. In short, even though some of the elements of this play derive from the absurd, it remains loyal to most of the fundamental tenets of realism.

Genet's name has also been associated with that of David Rudkin, whose play, *Afore Night Come* (1960), was acknowledged by some critics as England's

---

[33] Forbes Bramble, *The Dice* (London: Samuel French, 1962), p. 16.
[34] Taylor, p. 212.

first modern example of ritualistic theatre. The play starts off as a study in minute realism akin to Exton's *No Fixed Abode* or the beginning of Bond's, *The Pope's Wedding* (1962). A group of seasonal workers have arrived at a Black Country farm to help with the pear-picking. From the group of closely-drawn rustics three outsiders emerge: Larry, a student; Hobnails, a lunatic on day-release from a local asylum; and Shakespeare, a tramp. Shakespeare, in particular, becomes the focus of the group's hostility and suspicion. He is lazy and work-shy, suffering from a number of physical ailments (migraine, near-blindness). His dark glasses, suggesting that he has something to hide, are a source of disquiet. As the play progresses, still in apparently realistic terms, the attitudes to the tramp inspire the atavistic forces latent in the rustic community. One of the workers recognises in the diseased man the power to blight, to taint the healthy fruit, even his clouded eyes are regarded as a potential source of destruction: "His hands'm the hands on a dead man. His voice am the voice on a dead man".[35] Ginger, the leader, interprets Shakespeare as a symbol of infertility, responsible not only for the withered fruit but for his own wife's barrenness. Throughout the rest of the play a powerful, understated ritual evolves, a ritual intended to isolate the source of decay and to return it to the earth. During the closing moments, as an ominous crop-sprayer rotates over-head, Shakespeare is captured, a crucifix cut into his chest, and decapitated. The ritual completed, the body is quickly disposed of, and the men return to their business as night draws in.

As this plot summary indicates, the analogy between Genet and Rudkin is justifiable, though limited. In dramatic terms, the play remains realistic: the depiction of country life, the rustics and their closely observed dialect, are believable throughout.[36] The menace at the centre of the play is so powerful for this reason. The plot is presented in such credible terms that the ritual sacrifice which grows out of it is readily accepted as an inevitable, not an abnormal, fact. As with Bramble's work, there is nothing in the mechanics of Rudkin's play (be it character, language or plot) to suggest fantasy: its dark forces emerge organically from an entirely realistic framework.

Rudkin's play is, on another level, a link with the absurd, though it is to Ionesco and Artaud that attention must be directed. According to Rudkin: "drama should be like a dream the audience are having - to put them in touch with pre-cultural and infra-cultural aspects of themselves".[37] Indeed, *Afore Night Come*

---

[35] *New English Dramatists* 7, p. 112.
[36] Innes writes that the play is "firmly grounded in contemporary society ... [the orchard] is on the bus line from Birmingham; and the performance of the play is intended to reproduce actuality as closely as is possible in the theatre". Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama, 1890-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 420-1 (p. 420).
[37] David Rudkin, letter to the author, 19 May 1993.

shares a number of the attributes of sub-intellectual theatre.[38] Primarily, it operates on a metaphorical as well as a literal level. Various symbolic overtones are repeated constantly. Shakespeare, for instance, is associated by the workers with the Wandering Jew: "I reckon he been a-wandering the earth years now. And everywhere he do go, the grass do wither at his feet" (p. 113). This idea ties in with a Christian symbolism which under-cuts the play at various significant points. Hobnails, for instance, has been institutionalised because of a religious mania, his speech is often a garbled rendition of beatitudes and dogma. Conscious of the on-coming slaughter, he attempts to protect Larry with confused religious rhetoric: when rejected, he is paralleled to an abandoned Christ-figure. At the point of Shakespeare's death, the crucifix and the decapitation bring in strong overtones of the stories of John the Baptist and Holofernes. The helicopter fits easily into the literal-metaphorical duality: on one level it is an actual helicopter, busily spraying crops; on another level it is a brooding evil presence surveying the murder with grim impersonal satisfaction.[39] Rudkin's symbolism, never degenerating into mere emblematic equivalences and never fully defined, retains the suggestive and evocative power of Artaud's by appealing not to the intellectual but to the unconscious mind of the audience. As Rudkin points out, the central poetic images should have the power of dream images, communicating a multiplicity of associations that lie beyond the rational mind. The symbolic under-pattern, conveying a mood of menace and mounting terror, demands a response at an entirely emotional level.[40]

The plays of James Hanley have, in common with those of Rudkin, a strong thematic link with the absurd. However, Hanley differs from Rudkin, and, indeed, from all of the writers considered in this chapter, in that he relies throughout on realism to communicate his ideas. His plays, free of metaphoric techniques and presentational devices, are examples of a 'realistic' absurdism.

7.4 James Hanley, an absurd realist

"When he finally found an opening in the theatre [Hanley] proved, with no knowledge of Pinter, Beckett et al., to have reached almost the same conclusions as many of our young contemporaries about dramatic style and form".[41] The

---

[38] See Tom Milne, 'Afore Night Come', in *The Encore Reader*, pp. 234-8.
[39] Taylor, p. 308.
[40] The interweaving of realistic and metaphoric elements in *Afore Night Come* and in Rudkin's subsequent plays is discussed by Paul Lawley. See Paul Lawley, 'David Rudkin', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, 5th edn, ed. by K.A. Berney (London: St James Press, 1993), pp. 570-2 (p. 571).
[41] Taylor, p. 371.

implication of Taylor's comment is that Hanley's work embodies forms of absurdism akin to those of the French. In fact, Hanley is the most conservative and old-fashioned of the playwrights considered in this chapter, as his works belong, stylistically, within the realistic tradition. What associates him with the absurd is not his style but his fidelity to a pessimistic and despairing vision of the human condition. Using the techniques of realism, his plays manage to side-step social commentary and communicate some of those themes fundamental to the absurd.

The central dynamic of his first stage play, *Say Nothing* (1961), has similarities with Sartre's *No Exit*. Hanley portrays a living hell in which three people are trapped together, held by bonds of hatred, distrust and mutual dependence. Winifred despises her sister, Mrs Baines, for having committed adultery with her husband shortly before his death. Mrs Baines resents Winifred, in turn, for the guilt and the ill-feeling which she stirs up in the house. The ineffectual Mr Baines is dominated by both women, who use him as a vehicle to gain retribution on one another. Each of the characters respond to the brooding animosity by withdrawing into an inner world: since the death of her husband, Winifred has "lived in her head", dividing her time between her memories and bitter fantasies of revenge;[42] likewise, Mr Baines desires only to be cut off from all external stimuli, to inhabit his mental vistas, determined that "nothing will get in, and nothing will get out" (p. 369). The house, with all of its windows barred and doors locked, and the area allotted to the inhabitants of the house, reinforces their isolation. Each character jealously protects his small domain, preventing access to the others: Winifred ruminates silently behind her bedroom door, Mrs Baines hides in her kitchen, Mr Baines remains in his den, playing on a trumpet all day.

In the second act, the impression of an absolute seclusion is hardly affected by the arrival of an outsider. Charlie, a young lodger, is immediately overwhelmed by the oppressive atmosphere within the house. Having failed in his initial attempts at being friendly, he accepts the hostility and retreats into his room, his designated space. In the final scenes, however, the surface calm is shaken. Charlie decides to retaliate against his new and uncomfortable introspective life, and he tries to encourage each of the inmates out of their seclusion. His endeavours fail miserably and, like Mr Baines, he becomes absorbed by the dominating hatred and used as another pawn in the emotional battle. Disillusioned, he leaves the house and the rhythm of the isolated and despondent existence is restored.

---

[42] *Plays of the Year*, 27, ed. by J.C. Trewin (London: Elek, 1964), p. 430.

Hanley asserts that "*Say Nothing* is a total and final situation for three people lying on the rack of their own limitations - the characters of these people is itself their fate ... They dream, but their dreams smoulder, and never catch fire".[43] Though each of the characters may try to disappear into the depths of their minds, they are incapable of escaping: Mrs Baines acknowledges her power to penetrate the thoughts of those around her, and to use their own desires and aspirations to mock and belittle them. This theme recurs in Hanley's four other stage plays, all of which were performed after 1967. In *The Inner Journey* (1967), for instance, Dominic and Lizzie Christian, and their son, Antaeus, live in claustrophobic proximity. Like the Baines, each strives to protect himself from the loathing of the others by self-absorption in a dream-world: Dominic craves absolute privacy and inertia: "*My* living dream is for the wastes of some high up, remote, lost, shut in, and forgotten room ... How I love silence ... Peace".[44] This description of a preferred mode of existence has absurd overtones: "Just think of being a cork on water, floating and floating from nothing. Lonelier than anyone ever was, or could be, just as if you'd been dropped down from the skies into some *strange* country, and nobody talks your language, and you will never understand theirs ... floating from nothing to nothing" (p. 14).

The hatred of the three characters grows like a cancer, until each is destroyed. Christian and Antaeus (who is a dwarf) have a failed vaudeville act in which Antaeus is used as a ventriloquist's dummy. Unable to bear the humiliation of his treatment, Antaeus first withdraws into his dream-world before actively rebelling against his father. The rebellion is short-lived, and both men are forced to accept the truth that "we are chained together ... *chained forever*. And we shall be our own prisoners, our own warders, our own prison" (p. 24). The play ends with father and son united, moving blindly and joylessly though another of the endless cycle of their club acts. The closing scene of *The Inner Journey* repeats that of *Say Nothing*: locked in mutual abhorrence, the characters struggle to submerge themselves in an inner world which is, and will be, violated by those they hate most.

This chapter does not aim to invalidate Esslin's argument in 'Beyond the Absurd', but to elaborate upon the information therein, and to alter the focus. There was, as Esslin points out, an absorption of absurdist tenets into mainstream drama during the 1960s, but this was not, as his analysis implies, limited to the rather cosmetic episodes of dream-sequencing in the works of Osborne or Bond. Esslin ignores the sustained attempts by Cooper and Exton to explore the inscape

---

[43] Quoted in James Roose-Evans, 'James Hanley', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson (London: St James Press, 1973), pp. 345-9 (pp. 347-8).
[44] James Hanley, *Plays: One* (London: Kaye and Ward, 1968), p. 14.

of contemporary man; he fails to mention the experiments with metaphor and ritual in the plays of Rudkin, Speight and Bramble; and he overlooks the absurd themes which inform Hanley's work. Though a fragmented absurdism was integrated within mainstream theatre, it did not supersede or even create a serious challenge to social drama. Two of the plays which Esslin cites (*Inadmissible Evidence* and *Lear*) are deeply political plays, and *none* of the plays dealt with in this chapter lose sight of external or social realities: Howarth classifies *Sugar in the Morning* as an 'angry' play; Cooper is recognised as a socially committed writer; *The Boneyard*, *Afore Night Come* and *The Dice* never move too far from the 'real' world. The works examined here exemplify, to some extent, the predicament of absurdism in England in the few years after 1956: though British playwrights were willing to experiment with the techniques brought over from Ionesco and Beckett, many did so within the context of social theatre and social realism.

CONCLUSION

THE 'SECOND WAVE' OF 1968

Of the two main 'types' of absurdism which emerged in England in the late 1950s and early 1960s, the 'social' absurd was very much a predictable, perhaps even an inevitable, product of the prevailing theatrical climate. Born of the twin desires for social drama and innovatory forms, the 'social' absurd married the political commitment and social orientation of the "angry" or "kitchen-sink" schools to the exciting new dramatic models put forward by Ionesco and Beckett. When divested of its absurdist accoutrements, the anti-war and anti-nuclear polemic of David Campton is as politically relevant as Wesker's attack on fascism and Barry Reckord's discussions of institutionalised racism.[1] The political metaphors in Pinter's plays, which conjoin power models of exploitation and control with rituals of interrogation borrowed consciously from Gestapo prototypes, can no longer be ignored. Beneath the nonsense and the quasi-absurd developments of the surface action, Antrobus' plays offer wide-ranging criticisms of consumerism and bourgeois conformism: as such, his works belong to a tradition of social satire which burgeoned in the late 1950s, developed by the likes of Nigel Dennis (*The Making of Moo*)[2] and Christopher Logue (*The Lily-White Boys*).[3]

Despite their entrance into the dramatic world with abstract and experimental plays, neither Jellicoe nor Grillo escaped the influence of the new, social theatre. After their initial attempts at absurdism, both playwrights moved, technically and thematically, further towards realism and social convictions. Jellicoe's second play, *The Knack* (1961), is "consciously directed and controlled" and "explores woman's need to find her own voice in a society equipped in favour of the male".[4] *Shelley or The Idealist* (1965), Jellicoe's third play, "uses narrative

---

[1] Reckord's *You in Your Small Corner* (1960) is an exercise in documentary realism which examines the tensions between wealthy West Indians living in Brixton and their working class English neighbours. The earlier work, *Flesh to a Tiger* (1958), focuses on the struggle of people in a Jamaican slum who try to emancipate themselves from white domination.

[2] In his story of a colonial civil servant who invents a new religion, Dennis creates a comprehensive satire of the hypocrisy and financial orientation of organised belief. In an essay on the subject, Dennis examines in detail the relevance of satire to modern drama, using the religious satire of his own play as an example: see Nigel Dennis, 'Preface' in, *Two Plays and a Preface* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1958), pp. 7-53.

[3] Logue's play examines the rise to political power of a group of small-time criminals who use to their advantage the corruption and injustice inherent in local government. Dennis and Logue were both favoured by the Royal Court, and their explorations into satirical-political theatre were encouraged by George Devine.

[4] Ann Jellicoe, interview with the author, 30 August 1993.

and discussion, and belongs without doubt in the realist tradition".[5] In *Shelley*, Jellicoe "investigates the possibilities of women understanding themselves as political and economic entities ... using, as examples, the important women in Shelley's life".[6] Grillo's second play, *Hello Goodbye Sebastian* (1963), "parts from the existential gravity of *Gentlemen I...* and considers the problems facing a young and growing generation which seeks to shape itself anew: how do we avoid the mistakes of our society? How do we escape its tyranny? ... Is it possible to mould our generation into something healthy?".[7]

Even though the 'social' absurdists may be regarded as pioneers, their achievements are circumscribed, for each contributes to, and develops, an expected and accepted thematic paradigm. The second 'type' of absurdism, the 'pure' absurd, is altogether more radical and innovatory. Bermange and Saunders rejected the new drama of the late 1950s at both an aesthetic and epistemological level. Ignoring the thematic frameworks favoured by the new social dramatists, the 'pure' absurdists dedicated their works to the exploration of the human condition in its entirety, replacing the social with the metaphysical, the concrete with the abstract, commitment with despair. In some respects Bermange and Saunders were *too* original as the forms of theatre which they created proved to be far less popular than those of Pinter, Antrobus or Campton.[8] Their 'pure' absurdism was barely understood and failed to attract an audience until the late 1960s.[9] David Rudkin summarises the dilemma of the 'pure' absurdists:

> An absurdist tradition existed in British theatre before 1968 - genuine, home-grown absurdism that is - but it has been over-

---

[5] Letter to the author, 20 February 1993. See also Ann Jellicoe, 'Preface', in *Shelley or The Idealist* (London: Faber, 1966), pp. 13-20.

[6] Letter to the author, 20 February 1993. The problems of women's social and political role have continued to fascinate Jellicoe since *Shelley*. *The Bargain* (1979) examines the sexual and, by extension, political oppression of women after the defeat of Monmouth's rebellion in the 1680s; *The Western Women* (1984) discusses the part played by women during the siege of Lyme Regis during the Civil War.

[7] John Grillo, interview with the author, 29 August 1993. Grillo's *Number Three* (1970) is interpreted as an anti-fascist allegory in Peter Ansorge, *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman, 1975), p. 71. John Bull regards Grillo as a precursor of David Edgar, combining a cartoon style with overt satire. See John Bull, *New British Dramatists* (London: Macmillan, 1984), p. 154.

[8] Two other plays cited as examples of a 'pure' absurdism, Grillo's *Gentlemen I...* and Eveling's *An Unspeakable Crime*, received only one performance and neither has been produced since. Both plays remain unpublished.

[9] Bermange and Saunders have received extremely limited attention. In England, neither author has been given extended critical treatment beyond the *Contemporary Dramatists* anthology. Bermange, in particular, has failed to find an audience. Of the eighteen short plays which he wrote in the 1980s, sixteen were produced in the Netherlands and in Germany, whereas only two were staged in England. In Germany, Bermange has received three critics' awards, in 1968, 1981, and in 1987; in this country he goes unrewarded and, to a large extent, unacknowledged. See John Elsom, 'Barry Bermange', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 50-2 (p. 52).

> looked and anyone trying to find it nowadays has to dig deep ... absurdism lent itself too readily to political drama, it was swept along in the heady rush of "anti" plays which sprang up in abundance in the closing years of the 1950s: anti-authority; anti-war; anti-bourgeois. The *real* absurdists amongst that number were premature, buried fairly quickly beneath the weight of social plays ... premature, that is, because genuine dramatic experiments had to wait until 1968 to get a fair hearing.[10]

As Rudkin suggests, it was not until 1968, the year identified by John Russell Taylor as the beginning of the 'second wave' of modern drama, that a purer absurdism flourished in Britain.[11] In the late 1960s, particularly after 1968, the English dramatic climate became much more receptive to non-realist and non-social writers, nurturing a wide variety of experimentalists in general, and absurdists in particular. Of the fresh influx of playwrights with overtly absurdist leanings, the most outstanding were Peter Barnes,[12] Tom Stoppard,[13] Snoo Wilson and Heathcote Williams.[14] There are also a number of other post-1968 English 'absurdists' who have received insufficient critical recognition, such as A.F. Cotterell,[15] Robert Nye,[16] and Stanley Eveling.[17]

---

[10] David Rudkin, interview with the author, 16 March 1994.

[11] 'Second Wave' is the expression chosen by Taylor to describe the new British dramatists who began writing in the late 1960s. See John Russell Taylor, *The Second Wave: British Drama in the Sixties* (London: Methuen, 1978).

[12] Bernard F. Dukore, 'Peter Barnes and the Problem of Goodness', in *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, ed. by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 155-74.

[13] Hersh Zeifman, 'A Trick of the Light: Tom Stoppard's *Hapgood* and Postabsurdist Theatre', in Brater and Cohn, pp. 175-201. See also Anthony Callen, 'Stoppard's *Godot*: Some French Influences on Post-War English Drama', in *New Theatre Magazine*, 10.1 (1969), 22-30.

[14] Absurdism in the plays of Williams and Wilson, and in the early works of Howard Brenton, is discussed by Styan. See J.L. Styan, *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice, 2: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 171-81.

[15] Cotterell's first play, *The Nutters* (1969) is a fragmented internal monologue, spoken by the inmate of an insane asylum. *Social Services or All Creatures Great and Small* (1971) returns to the inscape, monitoring the disparate thoughts of a tramp as he walks through the rain, seeking shelter.

[16] Nye's absurdism is primarily linguistic; he uses his plays to explore the superficiality and the limitations of language as a communicative mechanism. In *Sisters* (1969) the compulsive desire of two women to talk culminates in the break down of their obsessive monologues: language becomes a random and incoherent juxtaposition of sounds. *Fugue* (1970) dispenses with language altogether, verbal interaction is reduced to isolated laughs, grunts and shouts.

[17] Though Eveling's first plays, *An Unspeakable Crime*, was written earlier in the 1960s, he did not begin writing professionally until 1967. *The Lunatic, the Secret Sportsman and the Woman Next Door* (1968) presents a journey into the collective unconscious of modern man. A Lunatic, speaking only gibberish, is used by the occupants of a house as a foil for their insecurities, a blank sheet onto which they project their deepest feelings. For the Sportsman, the Lunatic is a messiah, and his cryptic speeches contain a message of salvation. Doris develops a sexual dependence on the Lunatic, recognising in him a vehicle for escaping the fears of loneliness and isolation which occupy her thoughts. To Elsie he is a threat, an unknown outsider, and in her hostility towards him she unleashes the hysteria and neurosis which corrodes her sanity. The reactions of the three characters reveals the fear and confusion, the propensity to unthinking violence, which inform the universal interior reality. The play ends in similar fashion to Ionesco's *The Chairs*: the Lunatic is forced to speak his 'message', yet all he can manage is an assortment of non-sequiturs.

A brief comparative analysis of the circumstances which influenced the development of the first wave of the English 'absurd' (1956-1964) and of the second wave (the late 1960s), helps to explain the nature of both manifestations, and in particular their differences. After 1956, the rise of a 'social' absurd is understandable, given that the social (and usually socialist) ethos affected every stratum of the new theatre. Throughout the early years of the 1950s Kenneth Tynan, the country's most influential drama critic, called repeatedly for a politically involved theatre. Tynan's voice was joined, later in the 1950s, by a wide array of reviewers, and at least one magazine, *Encore*, was established specifically to promote the theatre as a social forum. The two new theatres renovated in the 1950s for the purposes of ushering in the new drama, the Royal Court and the Theatre Royal at Stratford East, became bastions of social and political theatre: leading producers (George Devine, Tony Richardson, Joan Littlewood, Ewan MacColl) were ardent socialists, and the new directors (Lindsay Anderson, William Gaskill, John Dexter) were committed to de-stabilising old style realism and bringing about a social awakening to the theatre.

A second difficulty facing absurd dramatists, and one which contributed to their inconsiderable impact, was the lack of any indigenous experimental tradition before 1956. Prior to the 1950s, experimental theatre in Britain was almost unheard of. At best, it is possible to cite a limited number of plays which, though remarkable for their experimentalism, tend to be isolated examples, temporary or unpopular departures from the author's usual techniques. Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* (1896), banned in England by the Lord Chamberlain until 1931, is an example of symbolist theatre which, influenced by the French, represents an erratic digression from his other, more conventional, works.[18] T.S. Eliot's *Sweeney Agonistes* (1926), attacking the inadequacies of existing theatre by using a fragmented and repetitive form, was abandoned by the author, and remains unfinished. The series of short plays which G.B. Shaw wrote at the end of his career, in the early 1930s, cannot be classified as genuinely experimental pieces: they are, according to Arthur Ganz, politicised reworkings of the nineteenth century Burlesques, using "grotesquely improbable plots and exotic landscapes" as part of a wide-ranging and often flippant political satire.[19] Ganz suggests that these plays were regarded by Shaw as peripheral entertainments, light-hearted

---

[18] Kerry Powell discusses the rigorous censorship laws in English theatre which led to the banning of *Salomé*, making experimental or unconventional plays unfavourable. See Kerry Powell, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 33-40. Anthony Jenkins' general introduction to Victorian theatre focuses on its conservatism, the deficiency of any controversial or experimental forms. See Anthony Jenkins, 'Breaking through the darkness', in *The Making of Victorian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 1-29.

[19] Arthur Ganz, *George Bernard Shaw* (London: Macmillan, 1983), pp. 202-12 (pp. 203-4).

addenda to his more significant earlier works.[20] The only consistent experimentalists in the English theatre in the first half of the twentieth century were W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood.[21] In the 1930s, Auden and Isherwood wrote a limited number of plays, such as *The Dance of Death* (1935) and *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (1936), which attempted to replace the written word with a form of ritualism and movement which is reminiscent of both Artaud and Brecht.[22] This list of plays is not intended as an exhaustive survey of pre-1956 experimental theatre. Isolated examples of other experimental writers can be found; certainly Katharine Worth discusses two playwrights of the 1930s, Rutland Boughton and Terence Gray, who tested the flexibility of established dramatic forms.[23] Nonetheless, experimental writers remained peripheral to mainstream developments, and the short list put forward here reflects the limited growth and diffuse nature of the avant-garde in England in the first half of the twentieth century.

In 1968 the dramatic situation was radically different from that faced by the writers of the 1956 generation. In the first instance, experimentalism had had over a decade to percolate into, and mature within, the dramatic consciousness. The English 'absurdists' of the late 1950s (and Pinter in particular) contributed to the acceptance of absurdism, as did Exton, Howarth, Speight and the mainstream writers who took on absurd techniques and ideas as part of their general experiments. Throughout the early and middle 1960s the infusion of absurdism into English theatre was aided by the rapid evolution of other experimental genres: the epic was reformulated (Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, Whiting's *The Devils*, Osborne's *Luther*, Bond's *Narrow Road to the Deep North*); Arden reworked older dramatic conventions such as the commedia dell'arte (*The Happy Haven*); and, more broadly, a physical, improvisational theatre was developed by Keith Johnstone, Henry Livings and many of the writers of Joan Littlewood's Theatre Workshop.

The production in England of experimental and absurd plays from France in the middle and late 1960s, greater in quantity and variety than had been experienced throughout the 1950s, contributed to the diversification of the drama. New plays by established absurdists arrived in England in the mid-1960s, led by

---

[20] Ganz, pp. 202-3.

[21] The plays of Auden and Isherwood are central to Katharine Worth's discussion of experimental writers in the English theatre in the first half of the twentieth century (Shaw and O'Casey make up the other writers in this study). See Katharine J. Worth, 'Away from Realism', in *Revolutions in Modern English Drama* (London: Bell, 1973), pp. 101-18 (pp. 106-12).

[22] The combination of epic, expressionistic and broader surrealist techniques in the plays of Auden and Isherwood is discussed by Innes. See Christopher Innes, *Modern British Drama, 1890-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 378-86.

[23] Worth, p. 105.

Ionesco (*Frenzy for Two, Hunger and Thirst*), and Beckett (*Come and Go, Eh Joe, Breath*). Absurdists who had had either very little or no previous exposure in England began to have plays performed after 1964: prevalent in this list are Adamov, Arrabal, Robert Pinget, Roland Dubillard, and René de Obaldia. Popular experimentalists also found audiences in England at this time: Marguerite Duras, Nathalie Sarraute, Jean Vauthier, and Jacques Audiberti.[24]

Perhaps the most convincing explanation for the rapid growth of absurd drama in English theatre in the late 1960s was the development of the "fringe". The monopoly over new drama, held during the late 1950s and early 1960s by Devine and Littlewood, was challenged in the mid-1960s. The first blow to these self-styled bastions of modern drama came in 1963 when Jim Haynes took over the Traverse Theatre in Edinburgh. Within five years, Haynes was responsible for premiering works by Adamov and Arrabal; for introducing Heathcote Williams and Stanley Eveling; and for bringing to Britain American experimental companies such as 'La Mama' and Grotowski's '13-row Theatre'. In 1964, Charles Marowitz and Peter Brook raised the consciousness of the theatre-going public to experimental and absurd ideas by running open workshop sessions in the LAMDA drama school theatre, under the general title of 'The Theatre of Cruelty'. As a result of Brook's endeavours, Artaud's *The Spurt of Blood*, Genet's *The Screens* and Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade* received their first productions in England. Haynes, Marowitz and Brook helped to open the flood-gates to the wide variety of workshops, travelling groups and small theatres which emerged in England in the late 1960s. The itinerant theatre companies which toured the provinces in the late 1960s and early 1970s, bringing with them innovative and experimental forms, became known as the "fringe", existing, as they did, on the outskirts, far from the established, respectable West End.[25]

Unlike the Royal Court and the Theatre Royal, the "fringe" theatre was not dedicated to drama as a forum for social or political issues. Its impetus, more genuinely experimental and iconoclastic, was to create plays of the greatest possible flexibility so as to appeal immediately to the broad and ever-changing nature of its audience. Elsom identifies a wide variety of types of "fringe"

---

[24] This information is taken from the production lists of the following books: *Who's Who in the Theatre*, ed. by Freda Gaye, 14th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1967), pp. 87-175; Colin Duckworth, *Angels of Darkness: Dramatic Effect in Beckett and Ionesco* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), pp. 144-5; David Bradby, *Adamov*, Research Bibliographies and Checklists (London: Grant and Cutler, 1975), p. 47; David Bradby, *Modern French Drama, 1940-1990*, 2nd rev. edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 313-16.

[25] See Jonathan Hammond, 'A Potted History of the Fringe', in *Theatre Quarterly*, 3.12 (1973), 37-46; John Elsom, 'Fringe Alternatives', in *Post-War British Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976), pp. 141-60; Peter Ansorge, 'Running wild', in *Disrupting the Spectacle*, pp. 1-21.

writing, only one of which, Agit-prop, was specifically social.[26] Other "fringe" manifestations include the neo-Dadaists, the distinctive feature of which was its "re-discovery of the delights in Dadaism, in nonsense for its own sake";[27] the Environmental companies who attempted to discover "new actor-audience relationships which in turn led to the exploration of spaces within rooms";[28] and Multi-media groups who produced events which involved amplified sound and light shows, and imposed these elements upon the human relationships within the theatre.[29] The lowest common denominator of the various groups was a testing of the established forms of drama, a desire to experiment with all aspects of accepted theatrical procedure. In this environment, the purer experimentalism of the absurd was granted the space to develop, a luxury which it was often denied in the more restricting socially-orientated theatre of the late 1950s.

During the late 1950s, the English 'absurd' emerged in a climate which, though sensitive to experimentalism, favoured and encouraged plays which contained a strongly social and political bias. Moreover, 'pure' absurdists such as Bermange and Saunders were denied a substructure of indigenous experimental drama to aid their efforts. By the late 1960s, English theatre had become practised in, and receptive to, purer forms of experimentalism, and the lust for the social was no longer all-embracing. The differences in circumstances between the first and second waves of the English 'absurd' demonstrate the validity of Rudkin's assertion that the first generation of English 'absurdists' was, to some extent, premature: in 1956 absurdism in England had entered a dramatic climate which was not yet ready for its abstract and cerebral theatrical forms. James Saunders concludes:

> I think it comes down, quite simply, to the fact that England is not France ... English theatre suffered from a prolonged case of cultural xenophobia ... it would not, could not, accept the avant-garde ... the few [writers of the avant-garde] who got through, were neutered ... they gave their plays a political bent, because politics in the theatre was acceptable at the time, safe ... there was something insidious about the way that English avant-gardists wrote political plays, as if a play was not worthy unless it was *relevant* to society ... English theatre took a long time to adjust to the avant-garde, to the absurd, too long ... thanks to the "fringe" explosion, the theatre of the absurd eventually found an audience, an opportunity to show itself as a legitimate form ... an abstract theatre which had every right to stand up and be counted.[30]

---

[26] Elsom, pp. 150-3.
[27] Elsom, pp. 154-6 (p. 155).
[28] Elsom, pp. 147-50 (p. 148).
[29] Elsom, pp. 153-4 (p. 153).
[30] James Saunders, interview with the author, 14 December 1993.

APPENDIX I

PRODUCTIONS OF FRENCH ABSURD PLAYS IN LONDON, 1952-1963[1]

1952

Jean Genet, *Les Bonnes*, 29 October, The Mercury (in French).

1955

Eugene Ionesco, *The Lesson*, 9 March, The Arts.
Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 3 August, The Arts.

1956

Jean Genet, *The Maids*, 5 June, New Lindsey.
Eugene Ionesco, *The Bald Prima Donna*, 6 November, The Arts.
Eugene Ionesco, *The New Tenant*, 6 November, The Arts.

1957

Samuel Beckett, *Fin de Partie*, 2 April, Royal Court (in French).
Samuel Beckett, *Acte Sans Paroles*, 2 April, Royal Court (in French).
Jean Genet, *The Balcony*, 22 April, The Arts.
Eugene Ionesco, *The Chairs*, 14 May, Royal Court.
Eugene Ionesco, *The Chairs*, 5 August, Royal Court.

---

[1] The information for this table comes from *Who's Who in the Theatre*, ed. by John Parker, 12th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1957), pp. 142-76; *Who's Who in the Theatre*, ed. by Freda Gaye, 13th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1961), pp. 11-139; *Who's Who in the Theatre*, ed. by Freda Gaye, 14th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1967), pp. 87-175; Colin Duckworth, *Angels of Darkness: Dramatic Effect in Beckett and Ionesco* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972), pp. 144-5; David Bradby, *Adamov*, Research Bibliographies and Checklists (London: Grant and Cutler, 1975), p. 47; David Bradby, *Modern French Drama, 1940-1990*, 2nd rev. edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 309-19.

1958

Eugene Ionesco, *The Lesson*, 18 June, Royal Court.
Eugene Ionesco, *The Chairs*, 18 June, Royal Court.
Samuel Beckett, *Krapp's Last Tape*, 28 October, Royal Court.
Samuel Beckett, *Endgame*, 28 October, Royal Court.

1960

Samuel Beckett, *Act Without Words II*, 25 January, Inst. of Contemporary Arts.
Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 28 April, Royal Court.
Eugene Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, 8 June, The Strand.
Eugene Ionesco, *The Shepherd's Chameleon*, 29 June, The Arts.
Eugene Ionesco, *Victims of Duty*, 29 June, The Arts.

1961

Eugene Ionesco, *Jacques*, 22 March, Royal Court.
Jean Genet, *The Blacks*, 30 May, Royal Court.
Jean Genet, *Deathwatch*, 25 June, The Arts.
Fernando Arrabal, *Orison*, 26 November, Royal Court.
Fernando Arrabal, *Fando and Lis*, 26 November, Royal Court.

1962

Arthur Adamov, *Spring 71*, June, Unity Theatre.
Boris Vian, *The Empire Builders*, 31 July, The New Arts.
Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days*, 1 November, Royal Court.

1963

Eugene Ionesco, *L'Avenir Est Dans les Oeufs*, 22 April, Piccadilly (In French).
Eugene Ionesco, *Amédée*, 22 April, Piccadilly (in French).
Arthur Adamov, *Scavengers*, 31 May, Unity Theatre.
Eugene Ionesco, *Exit the King*, 12 September, Royal Court.

APPENDIX II

TABLE MONITORING CRITICAL NEGLECT OF THE ENGLISH 'ABSURD' DURING THE FIRST TWENTY YEARS AFTER 1960

The following table presents a review of most of the major critical books on post-1956 drama in England which were written between 1960 and the early 1980s.[1] The aim of this table is to demonstrate the limited amount of attention given to the writers of the English 'absurd'.[2] Though Pinter and Simpson and, to a lesser extent, Jellicoe, have received attention, most of the writers, such as Antrobus and Campton, are hardly ever referred to in over-views of the period. Bermange and Grillo are not included on the table because they are mentioned only once, by Elsom.

	Pinter	Simpson	Jellicoe	Saunders	Campton	Antrobus
Kitchin, *Mid-Century Drama* (1960)	*	-	-	-	-	-
Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961)	* * *	* * *	-	-	-	-
Brown, *Contemporary Theatre* (1962)	C	* * *	*	-	-	-
Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama* (1962)	* *	-	-	-	-	-
Taylor, *Anger and After* (1962)[3]	C	* * *	* * *	* *	* *	-
Armstrong, *Experiment. Drama* (1963)[4]	C	* * *	-	-	-	-
Trewin, *Drama in Britain* (1965)	* * *	* *	* *	*	-	-
Kitchin, *Drama in the Sixties* (1966)	* * *	-	-	-	-	-
Esslin, *British Theatre, 1956-66* (1966)	C	-	-	-	-	-

[1] The books chosen for this table are almost all general over-views of the development of post-war English drama. Owing to their broad time-scale and multi-national approach, I have not included comprehensive works such as Allardyce Nicoll's *English Drama: A Modern Viewpoint* (1968) and Joseph Chiari's *Landmarks of Contemporary Drama* (1965). Genre-specific and theme-specific books (with the exception of *The Theatre of the Absurd*) have also been rejected, as they embrace a narrow spectrum of plays. This explains the absence of significant studies such as J.L. Styan's *The Dark Comedy* (tragi-comedy), Catherine Itzin's *Stages in the Revolution* (political theatre) and Michelene Wandor's *Look Back in Gender* (sexuality and the stage). The final type of book which I have not included are collections of past reviews by theatre critics: the most prominent being Kenneth Tynan, Martin Esslin, Harold Hobson and Charles Marowitz. Christopher Innes' book is included at the end in order to demonstrate that, as our latest detailed analysis of recent British drama, the under-representation of the English 'absurd' continues.

[2] All of the books referred to in the table are first editions. Full details are provided in the *Bibliography*.

[3] The revised version of this book (1969) includes cursory references to Antrobus and Bermange.

[4] Despite its title, this collection of essays presents a comprehensive survey of a wide range of English plays after 1956.

Lumley,*Trends in 20th Century Drama* (1967)	* * *	* * *	* *	*	-	-
Brown, *Modern British Dramatists* (1967)	C	*	*	-	-	-
Worth, *Revolutions in Modern Drama* (1972)	C	*	-	-	-	-
Hinchliffe, *British Theatre, 1950-70* (1974)	* * *	*	* *	-	* *	-
Elsom, *Post-War British Theatre* (1976)	* * *	* *	*	*	-	*
Kerensky, *The New British Drama* (1977)	* *	*	-	-	-	-
Nicoll, *British Drama* (1978)	* *	* *	*	-	-	-
Hayman, *British Theatre Since 1955* (1979)	* * *	-	-	*	-	-
Bigsby, *Contemporary English Drama* (1981)	C	*	*	-	-	-
Nightingale, *50 Modern British Plays* (1982)	C	-	-	-	-	-
Innes, *Modern British Drama* (1992)	C	* *	-	-	-	-

C	:	A chapter of the book devoted to the playwright.
* * *	:	A small section of a chapter devoted to the playwight.
* *	:	Three paragraphs or fewer devoted to the playwright.
*	:	The playwright is mentioned very briefly but not elaborated upon.
-	:	No mention.

APPENDIX IV

EWAN MACCOLL'S *THE OTHER ANIMALS* (1948)

The aim of Ewan MacColl's *The Other Animals*, to examine the structures of oppression and persecution programmed into the human psyche, demand expression on an internal, subconscious level. Hence, despite his overtly political intention, MacColl created, in 1948, a piece of rudimentary absurdism which anticipated many plays of the English 'absurd' by almost ten years.[1]

Most of MacColl's plays of the late 1930s and early 1940s follow the model of the American *Living Newspaper* tradition: topical documentary revues in a series of short scenes, based on current social and political problems. In *Uranium 235* (1946), however, MacColl goes beneath the journalistic style of the surface and allows the action to develop internally. In the first version of the play, the Scientist (a narrator figure) selects a member of the audience and explains that they are about to embark on a voyage through history in order to trace the genesis of nuclear science. The vehicle for this voyage is the subconscious:

> We are going on a journey through the corridors of the mind. Close your eyes. The are two long passages before you full of echoes and the symbols of dead dreams.[2]

The man from the audience is requested to close his eyes and the internalisation process is suggested by a temporary darkness. When the lights return the stage represents a scene from Ancient Greece. From this point, the play evolves as a series of episodes, each set at different historical moments, landmarks in the development of physics. Admittedly, the figure of the member of the audience is forgotten and no further reference is made to the fact that the action is supposed to be developing in his head. For the remainder of the play the action moves in purely epic style, as a series of historical fragments. In the re-written version of the play the internalisation episode is neglected altogether: instead of the journey into one man's subconscious, MacColl introduces a group of actors who inform the audience that they intend to re-enact episodes of scientific history.[3] In this

---

[1] MacColl was a founder member of Littlewood's 'Theatre of Action', established in 1934 specifically to introduce a political dimension into British theatre.

[2] Ewan MacColl, *Uranium 235* (Glasgow: William MacLellan, 1949), p. 19.

[3] Ewan MacColl, *Uranium 235*, in *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop: Political Playscripts 1930-50*, ed. by Howard Goorney and Ewan MacColl (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), p. 82.

way, the revised play remains entirely external and the epic framework is not blurred by the internalising incident.

MacColl was clearly fascinated by the possibilities of internalisation and, after the premature attempt in *Uranium 235*, he returned to the technique with more success in *The Other Animals* (1948). In this play the exploration of the subconscious reality is sustained, and takes on absurd proportions. All of the action in the play must be interpreted on a metaphoric level: the stage itself becomes a metaphor for the inside of the protagonist's skull, as he searches for a 'meaning' to his life in his dying hours. MacColl writes:

> The central theme of *The Other Animals* differs radically from the rest of the plays ... In them specific political events are dealt with and the actions which lead to those events. *The Other Animals*, on the other hand, is not so much concerned with specific political events as with the effects of the impact of political concepts on the inner life of a human being. In terms of real time, the play deals with the last two hours in the life of a condemned political prisoner, Robert Hanau. Prolonged ill-treatment and torture have reduced him to the point where he can no longer distinguish between fantasy and reality; his captors have become less real to him than the phantoms he conjures up in his delirium. The cage he occupies is real enough but no more real than the cage he has erected in his mind, the bars of which are fears, loyalties, beliefs, obligations and the need to maintain an identity ... *The Other Animals* is a single extended metaphor of a man's struggle to create order out of chaos.[4]

The play is divided into two parts. Part One represents one of the most powerfully absurd visions in England before he middle of the 1950s. In Part Two there is a significant change of emphasis, accompanied by the introduction of a didactic tone, and the development of the action on a more rational level. The stage, in Part One, is dominated by a gigantic conical cage surrounded by darkness. On one level this is the actual prison to which Hanau is returned after bouts of torture. On the metaphoric level, it is the cage of man's mind, a concretisation of William Blake's mind-forged manacles. At the beginning of the play a voice calls from the darkness, warning the audience that the spectacle before them takes place in "the light behind the eyes, the dream behind the fact":[5]

> this purgatory
> Set between two hells,
> The hell of blindness
> And the hell of seeing. (p. 133)

---

[4] Ewan MacColl, 'Introduction', in *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, pp. ix-lvii (p. lvii).
[5] Ewan MacColl, *The Other Animals*, in *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop*, p. 135.

Hanau, broken and delirious from torture, is dragged out of the darkness and forced into the cage. Alone in the limbo world behind his eyes, one of the guards warns him of that which he is about to encounter: "Beware of dreams, Hanau! Beware of dreams" (p. 138). The action which develops from this moment emanates directly from his fevered imagination. The stage directions inform us that the following sequence "*should have the quality of a dream, which indeed it is ... the creation of the prisoner's delirium*" (p. 141).

Though framed by political events, the action of Part One, unlike that of *Uranium 235*, is free of further political referents. Hanau's mind is shown at the threshold of sanity, deep beneath the conscious and external world, grappling with the abstract forces of its own being. He is approached by Robert, his quintessential self, his self-projection, who offers to take him "along the spiral staircase of our soul" (p. 144). Robert warns Hanau that here, at the core of the soul, he will find no 'answers' or 'meanings': his journey must end with the ultimate realisation that existence is chaos, a nothingness, and that all external and social constructs are a facile attempt to disguise this:

> You may be forced to deal
> The death-blow at your dreams
> And see yourself completely stripped
> Of all illusions, all supports, to find
> That you are just a hollow shell
> Left in the wake of an incurious wave
> Upon a rotting beach.
> It is because you are afraid
> That you attempt to fill the void
> With noisy speech and clamour. (p. 145)

Hanau attempts to struggle against this nihilistic vision, claiming that it is a "crazy dream ... a product of the madness prison breeds" (p. 146). A dialogue develops, Hanau desperate and begging for a 'meaning' to his life; Robert mocking, warning against the futility of endeavour. Robert invokes three figures which emerge from the darkness of the subconscious world. These figures, three women, dressed in white, green, and crimson, act as a nihilistic chorus. To each of Robert's questions they reply that life is without meaning. They become the voices of that existential chaos which lies in the subconscious:

> ROBERT: What lies beyond the horizons of your eyes?
> CHORUS: No fire,
> No gift,
> No final landscape.
> Only ashes,
> And the promise unfulfilled,
> Only the desolate night.
> ROBERT: Teach me the words of the song you sing

When the year trembles on the edge of spring.
CHORUS: No song,
No voice,
No whispered answer.
Only echoes
And the silence after
The last reverberation;
Only the question. (p. 154)

The concluding movements of Part One are a pastiche of voices, those of Robert and those of the three women. Each presents a variation on the same theme of the meaninglessness of life. Man is stripped of all dignity and hope; he is presented as nothing more than a collection of fleeting sense perceptions, a decaying being awaiting death. The first half of the play stops with Hanau at his lowest point, having accepted the despairing creed:

HANAU: Nothing to do but wait.
ROBERT: Nothing.
HANAU: No life without stigmata.
ROBERT: No.
HANAU: Only bars and silence.
ROBERT: Death and silence.
HANAU: The future and silence.
ROBERT: Yes.
HANAU: No company but the dying.
ROBERT: And the dead. (p. 176)

The 'absurdism' of the first part exists within structures which owe a great deal to German expressionism: the declamatory tone; the use of a rhapsodic poetry; recurrent, often jarring, physical motifs (violent bodily movements, dancing, miming); and, most importantly, the socialist bias.[6] In Part Two the expressionistic elements predominate. Having reduced man to the lowest point of despondency, the second part represents a rebirth through political self-realisation. The prevalent feature of the latter half is its didacticism, as each development represents a step towards moral and political understanding. Robert is approached by three figures. As opposed to the destructive abstractions of the three women, these are more concrete, bringing with them a message of hope. Each is an actual, historical character, a participant in war against tyranny. The first, for instance, is a soldier who had died in his attempts to fight against fascism in the Spanish Civil War. Through his encounters with these people, Hanau begins to regain his faith in fighting for a cause. Man should not capitulate and

---

[6] See J.L. Styan, 'Expressionism in the theatre', in *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 3: Expressionism and Epic Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 1-7; R.S. Furness, 'Problems of Definition', in *Expressionism* (London: Methuen, 1973), pp. 1-2.

abandon himself to despair, it is imperative that he fight for the those things in which he believes, and, in so doing, control the encroaching chaos.

After his encounter with the three freedom-fighters, Hanau finds himself on a train which, without a driver, is heading for collision. He appeals to the two passengers in his carriage. The first, a commercial traveller named Christie, with an eye for a profit, is interested only in selling Hanau bread and fish. The biblical analogy is overt and, in rejecting Christie's impractical and self-seeking offer, Hanau symbolically repudiates the facile comforts of organised religion. The second passenger, an old woman who wants only to sleep, is equally ineffectual. He must turn his back on this woman, a symbol of personal apathy, if he is to help himself and take control of the train. Though Hanau dies at the end of the play, he does so at the moment of his greatest personal achievement. He has overcome despair and, consequent to his symbolic encounters in Part Two, has acquired the courage of self-definition. He dies at the moment of lucidity, realising that to fight for a cause, to believe in action and self-will, is the only way in which man can conquer the chaos from within and from outside.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

UNPUBLISHED MATERIAL

(i) Unpublished plays

The plays of each author are listed chronologically, in accordance with the date of the first production. With the exceptions of the plays of Reckord and Logue, which are part of the Lord Chamberlain's collection in the British Library, all of the plays mentioned here are original typescripts which were provided by the authors themselves or, in Cooper's case, by his estate.

BERMANGE, Barry

1964: *The Cloud*
1964: *The Mortification*
1969: *Scenes From Family Life* [1]

CAMPTON, David

1960: *At Sea*
1963: *Comeback*
1963: *Cock and Bull Story*

COOPER, Giles

1950: *Never Get Out*
1953: *The Owl and the Pussy Cat*
1955: *The Sound of Cymbals*
1961: *The Lonesome Road*

EVELING, Stanley

1963: *An Unspeakable Crime*

---

[1] A later and much revised version of this play can be found in *Collection: Literature for the Seventies*, ed. by Gerald and Nancy S. Messner (Lexington, Massachusetts: D.C. Heath, 1972).

EXTON, Clive

1960: *Where I Live*
1962: *The Close Prisoner*
1966: *The Boneyard*

GRILLO, John

1963: *Gentlemen I ....*
1970: *History of a Poor Old Man*

HOWARTH, Donald

1958: *Sugar in the Morning*

JELLICOE, Ann

1979: *The Bargain*
1984: *The Western Women*

LOGUE, Christopher

1960: *The Lily-White Boys*

RECKORD, Barry

1958: *Flesh to a Tiger*
1960: *You in Your Small Corner*

RUDKIN, David

1960: *No Accounting for Taste*
1963: *The Stone Dance*
1967: *Children Playing*

SAUNDERS, James

1949: *Cinderella Comes of Age*
1952: *Love and a Limousine*

1952: *The Drop Too Much*
1955: *Moonshine*
1957: *Women Are So Unreasonable*
1958: *Dog Accident*
1959: *The Ark*
1959: *Committal*

SPEIGHT, Johnny

1961: *The Compartment*
1962: *The Knacker's Yard*
1962: *The Playmates*

(ii) Letters and interviews

ANTROBUS, John: 20 February 1992; 9 February 1993; 18 May 1993; 30 January 1994; 2 April 1994

ARDEN, John: 9 June 1991; 27 May 1992; 26 May 1993

BENTINE, Michael: 20 May 1993

BOND, Edward: 6 June 1989; 2 October 1989; 3 October 1990; 14 December 1991; 20 November 1992

CAMPTON, David: 12 August 1989; 20 July 1990; 2 September 1990; 12 December 1991; 5 May 1992; 3 June 1992; 16 April 1993; 13 May 1993; 16 June 1993; 4 October 1993; 17 October 1993; 5 June 1994

CAUTE, David: 18 October 1993

DYER, Charles: 16 September 1993; 11 October 1993

EVELING, Stanley: 13 March 1994

EXTON, Clive: 7 March 1994

GRILLO, John: 11 February 1993; 22 February 1993; 8 May 1993; 29 August 1993 (interview); 14 January 1994

HALL, Willis: 1 September 1993; 7 November 1993

HOWARTH, Donald: 23 February 1994

JELLICOE, Ann: 4 January 1992; 23 May 1992; 11 December 1992; 20 February 1993; 30 August 1993 (interview); 9 September 1993

LIVINGS, Henry: 10 October 1993; 21 February 1994

MCGRATH, John: 17 October 1993; 20 January 1994

RUDKIN, David: 8 May 1993; 19 May 1993; 14 March 1994; 16 March 1994 (interview)

SAUNDERS, James: 13 December 1991; 2 January 1992; 3 August 1992; 14 October 1992; 3 February 1993; 12 March 1993; 12 June 1993; 27 July 1993; 30 August 1993

SECOMBE, Harry: 5 June 1993 (interview); 26 June 1993

SIMPSON, N.F.: 2 October 1993; 11 October 1993; 20 January 1994; 17 March 1994

SPEIGHT, Johnny: 17 October 1993; 2 December 1993

TREVELYAN, Raleigh: 30 August 1993

WATERHOUSE, Keith: 14 October 1993

(iii) Unpublished dissertations

CLEVELAND, Louise O., 'Trials in the Soundscape: Achievements of the Experimental British Radio Play' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1973)

MANOR, Ehud, 'The Anglo-Jewish Predicament in the Plays of Bernard Kops, Arnold Wesker, Harold Pinter and Peter Shaffer' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1985)

PRIMARY PUBLISHED MATERIAL

(i) Published plays

The plays of each author are listed chronologically, in accordance with the date of the first production.

ADAMOV, Arthur

1950: *L'Invasion* in *La Parodie; L'Invasion* (Paris: Charlot, 1950)
1953: *Professor Taranne*, trans. by Peter Meyer, in *Absurd Drama*, ed. by Martin Esslin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965)
1955: *Ping Pong*, trans. by Derek Prouse, in *Two Plays: Professor Taranne and Ping Pong* (London: John Calder, 1962)
1957: *Paolo Paoli: The Years of the Butterfly*, trans. by Geoffrey Brereton (London: John Calder, 1959)

ALBEE, Edward

1958: *The Zoo Story* in *Absurd Drama*, ed. by Martin Esslin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965)

ANTROBUS, John

1965: *The Missing Links* in *Why Bournemouth? And Other Plays* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970)
1965: *You'll Come to Love Your Sperm Test* in *New Writers* 4 (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967)
1968: *Trixie and Baba* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1969)
1968: *Why Bournemouth?* in *Why Bournemouth? And Other Plays* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970)
1969: *Captain Oates' Left Sock* (London: Samuel French, 1974)

1971: *An Apple A Day* in *Why Bournemouth? And Other Plays* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970)

1980: *Hitler in Liverpool* in *Hitler in Liverpool and Other Plays* (London: John Calder, 1983)

And also:

1980: *One Orange for the Baby*

1980: *Up in the Hide*

ANTROBUS, John and Spike MILLIGAN

1963: *The Bedsitting Room* (London: Universal Tandem, 1977)

ARDEN, John

1960: *The Happy Haven* in *Three Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964)

ARRABAL, Fernando[2]

1955: *Fando and Lis*, trans. by Barbara Wright, in *Plays*, Volume I (London: John Calder, 1976)

And also:

1956: *The Two Executioners*, trans. by Barbara Wright

1957: *Orison*, trans. by Barbara Wright

1957: *The Car Cemetery*, trans. by Barbara Wright

ARTAUD, Antonin

1927: *The Spurt of Blood*, trans. by Victor Corti, in *Antonin Artaud: Collected Works*, Volume 1 (London: John Calder, 1978)

AUDEN, W.H. and Christopher ISHERWOOD

1935: *The Dance of Death* (London: Faber and Faber, 1933)

1936: *The Dog Beneath the Skin* (London: Faber and Faber, 1935)

1936: *The Ascent of F6* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936)

---

[2] Owing to disagreement among critics concerning the production dates of Arrabal's early plays, the dates used here refer to when the plays were written.

BARNES, Peter

1968: *The Ruling Class* in *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1989)

BECKETT, Samuel

1953: *Waiting for Godot*, trans. by the author, in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986)

And also:

1957: *Endgame*
1957: *All That Fall*
1958: *Krapp's Last Tape*
1959: *Embers*
1961: *Happy Days*
1963: *Play*
1966: *Eh Joe*
1966: *Come and Go*
1969: *Breath*
1972: *Not I*

BEHAN, Brendan

1954: *The Quare Fellow* in *Behan: The Complete Plays* (London: Methuen, 1978)

And also:

1958: *The Hostage*

BERMANGE, Barry

1962: *Nathan and Tabileth* in *Nathan and Tabileth and Oldenberg* (London: Methuen, 1967)
1962: *No Quarter* in *No Quarter and The Interview* (London: Methuen, 1969)
1967: *Oldenberg* in *Nathan and Tabileth and Oldenberg* (London: Methuen, 1967)
1967: *The Interview* in *No Quarter and The Interview* (London: Methuen, 1969)
1969: *Invasion* in *No Quarter and The Interview* (London: Methuen, 1969)

BOLT, Robert

1960: *A Man for All Seasons* in *New English Dramatists* 6 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963)

BOND, Edward

1962: *The Pope's Wedding* in *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1977)
And also:
1965: *Saved*
1968: *Narrow Road to the Deep North* in *Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1978)
And also:
1971: *Lear*

BRAMBLE, Forbes

1959: *The Dice* (London: Samuel French, 1962)

CAMPTON, David

1950: *Going Home* (Manchester: Abel Heywood and Son, 1951)
1951: *Change Partners* (Manchester: Abel Heywood and Son, 1951)
1953: *Sunshine on the Righteous* (Leicester: David Campton, 1953)
1957: *A Smell of Burning* in *The Lunatic View* (Scarborough: Marshall and Son, 1960)
And also:
1957: *Memento Mori*
1957: *Getting and Spending*
1957: *Then...*
1960: *Mutatis Mutandis* (Leicester: David Campton, 1960)
1960: *Soldier from the Wars Returning* in *Miller's Medley*, 3 (London: J. Garnet Miller, 1963)
1960: *Out of the Flying Pan* in *Little Brother: Little Sister and Out of the Flying Pan* (London: Methuen, 1966)
And also:
1960: *Little Brother: Little Sister*
1961: *Passport to Florence* (London: J. Garnet Miller, 1967)

1962: *Incident* in *The Playmakers: One* (Huddersfield: Schofield and Sims, 1976)
1962: *Usher* (London: J. Garnet Miller, 1973)
1964: *A Point of View* in *Laughter and Fear* (London: Blackie and Son, 1969)
And also:
1965: *Where Have All the Ghosts Gone?*

CHAPMAN, Henry

1957: *You Won't Always Be On Top* (London: Methuen, 1965)

COOPER, Giles

1956: *Mathry Beacon* in *Six Plays for Radio* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1966)
And also:
1957: *The Disagreeable Oyster*
1958: *Under the Loofah Tree*
1958: *Unman, Wittering and Zigo* (London: Macmillan, 1978)
1962: *Everything in the Garden* in *New English Dramatists* 7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963)
1964: *The Object* in *New English Dramatists* 12 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968)
1966: *Happy Family* in *New English Dramatists* 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967)

COTTERELL, A.F.

1969: *The Nutters* in *The Nutters and Other Plays* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1971)
And also:
1971: *Social Services or All Creatures Great and Small*

DELANEY, Shelagh

1958: *A Taste of Honey* (London: Methuen, 1959)

1960: *The Lion in Love* (London: Methuen, 1961)

DENNIS, Nigel

1957: *The Making of Moo* in *Two Plays and a Preface* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1958)

DYER, Charles

1962: *Rattle of a Simple Man* (London: Samuel French, 1963)
1966: *Staircase* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966)

ELIOT, T.S.

1932: *Sweeney Agonistes* in *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969)

EVELING, Stanley

1968: *The Lunatic, the Secret Sportsman and the Women Next Door* in *The Lunatic, the Secret Sportsman and the Women Next Door and Vibrations* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1970)

EXTON, Clive

1958: *No Fixed Abode* in *Six Granada Plays* (London: Faber, 1960)

GENET, Jean

1947: *The Maids*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman, in *The Maids and Death-watch* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1954)
And also:
1949: *Deathwatch*
1956: *The Balcony*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1958)
1961: *The Screens*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove Press, 1962)

GRILLO, John

1965: *Hello Goodbye Sebastian* in *Gambit*, 4.16 (1970)
1970: *Number Three* in *New Short Plays*, 3 (London: Methuen, 1972)

HALL, Willis

1958: *The Long and the Short and the Tall* in *Penguin Plays: Hall; Pinter; Simpson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964)

HALL, Willis and Keith WATERHOUSE

1960: *Billy Liar* (London: Samuel French, 1960)
1962: *All Things Bright and Beautiful* (London: Samuel French, 1963)

HANLEY, James

1961: *Say Nothing* in *Plays of the Year,* 27, ed. by J.C. Trewin (London: Elek, 1964)
1967: *The Inner Journey* in *Plays: One* (London: Kaye and Ward, 1968)

HASTINGS, Michael

1956: *Don't Destroy Me* in *Three Plays* (London: W.H. Allen, 1966)
And also:
1957: *Yes, And After*

IONESCO, Eugene

1950: *The Bald Prima Donna*, trans. by Donald Allen, in *Four Plays by Eugene Ionesco* (New York: Grove Press, 1958)
1951: *The Lesson*, trans. by Donald Watson, in *Rhinoceros; The Chairs; The Lesson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962)
And also:
1952: *The Chairs* , trans. by Donald Watson
1953: *The Leader*, trans. by Derek Prouse, in *Plays: Volume Four* (London: John Calder, 1960)

1953: *Victims of Duty*, trans. by Donald Watson, in *Plays: Volume Two* (London: John Calder, 1958)
And also:
1954: *Amédée or How To Get Rid Of It*, trans. by Donald Watson
1955: *Jack or The Submission*, trans. by Donald Allen, in *Four Plays by Eugene Ionesco* (New York: Grove Press, 1958)
1956: *The New Tenant*, trans. by Donald Watson, in *Plays: Volume Two* (London: John Calder, 1958)
1959: *The Killer*, trans. by Donald Watson, in *Three Plays* (London: John Calder, 1958)
1960: *Rhinoceros*, trans. by Derek Prouse, in *Plays: Volume Four* (London: John Calder, 1960)
1963: *A Stroll in the Air*, trans. by Donald Watson, in *Plays: Volume Six* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1965)
1966: *Hunger and Thirst*, trans. by Donald Watson, in *Plays: Volume Seven* (London: Calder and Boyars, 1968)
1980: *Dreams to be Staged Eventually*, trans. by Pauline Baggio and J. Ramsay Bickers, in *The Dream and the Play: Ionesco's Theatrical Quest*, ed. by Moshe Lazar (Malibu: Undena, 1982)

JARRY, Alfred

1896: *Ubu Rex*, trans. by Cyril Connolly and Simon Watson Taylor, in *The Ubu Plays* (London: Methuen, 1968)

JELLICOE, Ann

1958: *The Sport of My Mad Mother* in *The Observer Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958)
1961: *The Knack* in *The Knack and The Sport of My Mad Mother* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985)
1964: *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, rev. edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1964)
1965: *Shelley or The Idealist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966)

JOHN, Errol

1958: *Moon On A Rainbow Shawl* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958)

KOPS, Bernard

1958: *The Hamlet of Stepney Green* in *New English Dramatists* 1 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960)

1960: *The Dream of Peter Mann* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960)

LEWIS, Stephen

1960: *Sparrers Can't Sing* (London: Evans Brothers, 1961)

LIVINGS, Henry

1961: *Stop It, Whoever You Are* in *New English Dramatists* 5 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962)

MACCOLL, Ewan

1946: *Uranium 235* (Glasgow: William MacLellan, 1949)

1948: *The Other Animals* in *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop: Political Playscripts 1930-50*, ed. by Howard Goorney and Ewan MacColl (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986)

MANKOWITZ, Wolf

1953: *A Kid for Two Farthings* (London: Deutsch, 1953)

MERCER, David

1962: *A Suitable Case for Treatment* in *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1990)
And also:

1965: *The Governor's Lady*

NYE, Robert

1969: *Sisters* in *Penthesilea; Fugue and Sisters* (London: Boyars, 1976)
And also:

1970: *Fugue*

OBALDIA, René de

1963: *An Edinburgh Impromptu* in *New Writers,* 4 (London: Calder and Boyars, 1967)
1965: *The Jellyfish's Banquet*, trans. by Donald Watson, in *Plays: Volume 3* (London: John Calder, 1982)

OSBORNE, John

1956: *Look Back in Anger* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957)
1957: *The Entertainer* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957)
1961: *Luther* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961)
1964: *Inadmissible Evidence* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965)

OWEN, Allen

1961: *Progress to the Park* in *New English Dramatists* 5 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962)

PINTER, Harold

1957: *The Room* in *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1976)
And also:
1958: *The Birthday Party*
1958: *A Slight Ache*
1960: *The Dumb Waiter*
1960: *A Night Out*
1960: *The Caretaker* in *Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1977)
And also:
1960: *Night School*
1961: *The Collection*
1963: *The Lover*
1965: *Tea Party* in *Plays: Three* (London: Methuen, 1978)
And also:
1965: *The Homecoming*
1967: *The Basement*
1968: *Landscape*
1969: *Silence*

1980: *The Hothouse* in *Plays: One*, rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1986)
1982: *A Kind of Alaska* in *Plays: Four*, rev. edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1993)
And also:
1983: *Precisely*
1984: *One for the Road*
1988: *Mountain Language*
1991: *The New World Order*

PRIESTLEY, J.B.

1946: *An Inspector Calls* in *Time and the Conways and Other Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969)
And also:
1947: *The Linden Tree*

RATTIGAN, Terence

1948: *The Browning Version* in *The Deep Blue Sea and Three Other Plays* (London: Pan, 1955)

RECKORD, Barry

1963: *Skyvers* in *New English Dramatists* 9 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966)

RUDKIN, David

1960: *Afore Night Come* in *New English Dramatists* 7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963)

SAROYAN, William

1961: *Sam the Highest Jumper of Them All* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961)

SARTRE, Jean-Paul

1943: *The Flies*, trans. by Stuart Gilbert, in *Altona and Other Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962)

SAUNDERS, James

1959: *Alas, Poor Fred* (Scarborough: Marshall and Son, 1960)
1959: *Barnstable* (London: Samuel French, 1961)
1960: *Return to a City* in *Neighbours and Other Plays* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1968)
And also:
1961: *A Slight Accident*
1962: *Next Time I'll Sing to You* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963)
1963: *The Pedagogue* in *Neighbours and Other Plays* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1968)
1963: *Who Was Hilary Maconochie?* in *Savoury Meringue and Other Plays* (Ashover, Derbyshire: Amber Lane, 1980)
1964: *A Scent of Flowers* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1965)
1973: *Games* in *Games and After Liverpool* (London: Samuel French, 1973)

SHAFFER, Peter

1958: *Five Finger Exercise* in *Three Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976)
1964: *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (Harlow: Longman, 1991)
1965: *Black Comedy* in *Four Plays* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981)

SHAW, George Bernard

1932: *Too True to Be Good* in *Bernard Shaw's Plays*, ed. by Warren S. Smith (London: W.W. Norton, 1970)

SIMPSON, N.F.

1957: *A Resounding Tinkle* in *Penguin Plays: Hall; Pinter; Simpson* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964)
1958: *The Hole* (London: Samuel French, 1958)
1959: *One Way Pendulum* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960)

1961: *The Form* (London: Samuel French, 1961)

STOPPARD, Tom

1966: *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (London: Faber and Faber, 1976)

VIAN, Boris

1959: *The Empire Builders*, trans. by Simon Watson Taylor, *Plays of the Year* 25, ed. by J.C. Trewin (London: Elek, 1963)

WEISS, Peter

1964: *Marat/Sade*, trans. by Geoffrey Skelton (New York: Pocket Books, 1966)

WESKER, Arnold

1958: *Chicken Soup with Barley* in *The Wesker Trilogy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960)
And also:
1959: *Roots*
1959: *The Kitchen* in *New English Dramatists* 2 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960)
1960: *I'm Talking About Jerusalem* in *The Wesker Trilogy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960)
1962: *Chips with Everything* in *New English Dramatists* 7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963)

WHITING, John

1961: *The Devils* in *New English Dramatists* 6 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963)

WILDE, Oscar

1896: *Salomé* (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1909)

WOOD, Charles

1963: *Cockade* in *New English Dramatists* 8 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965)

(ii) Non-dramatic works (essays, books, speeches)

BECKETT, Samuel, *Murphy* (London: John Calder, 1963)

BECKETT, Samuel, 'Proust and Three Dialogues: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit' (London: John Calder, 1965)

BOND, Edward, 'The Rational Theatre', in *Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1978), pp. ix-xviii

BOND, Edward, 'Us, Our Drama and the National Theatre', *Plays and Players*, October (1978), 8-9

CAMPTON, David, *Becoming a Playwright* (London: Robert Hale, 1992)

DENNIS, Nigel, 'Preface', in *Two Plays and a Preface* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1958), pp. 7-53

GRILLO, John, 'An Excess of Nightmare', *Gambit*, 6.23 (1973), 18-24

HUXLEY, Aldous, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1946)

IONESCO, Eugene, *Fragments of a Journal*, trans. by Jean Stewart (London: Quartet, 1987)

IONESCO, Eugene, *Notes and Counter-Notes*, trans. by Donald Watson (London: John Calder, 1964)

IONESCO, Eugene, 'Reality in Depth', *Encore*, 5.1 (1958), 9-10

IONESCO, Eugene, 'Why do I Write?', *Gambit*, 8.32 (1978), 64-73

JELLICOE, Ann, *Some Unconscious Influences in the Theatre*, The Judith Wilson Lecture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967)

JELLICOE, Ann, 'Something of Sport', *Encore*, 5.1 (1958), 25-7

JELLICOE, Ann, 'Preface to the New Version', in *The Sport of My Mad Mother*, rev. edn (London: Faber and Faber, 1964), pp. 5-6

JELLICOE, Ann, 'Preface', in *Shelley or The Idealist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), pp. 13-20

JELLICOE, Ann, 'The Royal Court Theatre Writers' Group', *Ambit*, 68 (1976), 61-4

MACCOLL, Ewan, 'Introduction: The Evolution of a Revolutionary Theatre Style', in *Agit-prop to Theatre Workshop: Political Playscripts 1930-50*, ed. by Howard Goorney and Ewan MacColl (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. ix-lvii

MERCER, David, 'Mercer on Mercer', in *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. xix-xxii

MILLIGAN, Spike, *The Book of the Goons* (London: Robson, 1984)

MILLIGAN, Spike, *The Goon Show Scripts* (London: Sphere, 1973)

MILLIGAN, Spike, *The Lost Goon Shows* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988)

PINTER, Harold, 'A Letter to Peter Wood', in *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party; The Caretaker; The Homecoming*, Casebook Series, ed. by Michael Scott (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 79-82

PINTER, Harold, 'Writing for Myself', in *Plays: Two* (London: Methuen, 1977), pp. 9-12

PINTER, Harold, 'Writing for the Theatre', in *Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1976), pp. 9-16

SAROYAN, William, 'Introduction', in *Sam the Highest Jumper of Them All* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), pp. 11-14

SIMPSON, N.F., 'Making Nonsense of Nonsense', *Transatlantic Review*, 21 (1966), 5-13

TREVELYAN, Raleigh, 'Forward', in *Next Time I'll Sing to You* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1963), pp. vii-viii

SECONDARY MATERIAL

(i) Book-length studies and monographs

ALVAREZ, A., *Beckett* (London: Fontana, 1973)

ANDERSON, Lindsay, and Kenneth Tynan, eds, *Declaration* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1957)

ANDERSON, Michael and others, eds, *A Handbook of Contemporary Drama* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1972)

ANDERSON, Michael, *Anger and Detachment: A Study of Arden, Osborne and Pinter* (London: Pitman, 1976)

ANSORGE, Peter, *Disrupting the Spectacle: Five Years of Experimental and Fringe Theatre in Britain* (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1975)

ARMSTRONG, William A., ed., *Experimental Drama* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1963)

BAIR, Deirdre, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (London: Vintage, 1990)

BARNES, Philip, *A Companion to Post-War British Theatre* (London: Croom Helm, 1986)

BERNEY, K.A., ed., *Contemporary Dramatists*, 5th edn (London: St. James Press, 1993)

BIGSBY, C.W.E., ed., *Contemporary English Drama*, Stratford-Upon-Avon-Studies, 19 (London: Edward Arnold, 1981)

BONNEFOY, Claude, *Conversations with Eugene Ionesco*, trans. by Jan Dawson (London: Faber and Faber, 1970)

BRADBY, David, *Adamov*, Research Bibliographies and Checklists (London: Grant and Cutler, 1975)

BRADBY, David, *Modern French Drama, 1940-1990*, 2nd rev. edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

BRATER, Enoch, ed., *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986)

BRATER, Enoch, and Ruby Cohn, eds, *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1990)

BROWN, John Russell, *A Short Guide to Modern British Drama*, Heinemann Educational Books (London: Heinemann, 1982)

BROWN, John Russell, ed., *Modern British Dramatists: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968)

BROWN, John Russell, and Bernard Harris, eds, *Contemporary Theatre*, Stratford-Upon-Avon-Studies, 4 (London: Edward Arnold, 1962)

BROWNE, Terry, *Playwrights' Theatre: The English Stage Company at the Royal Court* (London: Pitman, 1975)

BULL, John, *New British Dramatists* (London: Macmillan, 1984)

CHAMBERS, Colin, and Mike Prior, eds., *Playwrights' Progress: Patterns of Postwar British Drama* (Oxford: Amber Lane Press, 1987)

CHIARI, Joseph, *Landmarks of Contemporary Drama* (London: Herbert Jenkins, 1965)

CHOUDHURI, A.D., *Contemporary British Drama: An Outsider's View* (New Delhi: Arnold-Heinemann, 1976)

COE, Richard N., *Ionesco: A Study of his Plays*, rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1971)

COHN, Ruby, *Retreats from Realism in Recent English Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

COREN, Michael, *Theatre Royal: 100 Years of Stratford East* (London: Quartet, 1984)

DAVISON, Peter, *Contemporary Drama and the Popular Dramatic Tradition in England* (London: Macmillan, 1982)

DONAHUE, Thomas John, *The Theatre of Fernando Arrabal: A Garden of Earthly Delights* (New York: New York University Press, 1980)

DRAPER, Alfred, *The Story of The Goons* (London: Severn House, 1977)

DUCKWORTH, Colin, *Angels of Darkness: Dramatic Effect in Samuel Beckett with Special Reference to Eugene Ionesco* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1972)

DUKORE, Bernard F., *Harold Pinter* (London: Macmillan, 1982)

ELSOM, John, *Post-War British Theatre* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1976)

ELSOM, John, *Post-War British Theatre Criticism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981)

ESSLIN, Martin, *Artaud* (London: John Calder, 1976)

ESSLIN, Martin, *Brief Chronicles* (London: Temple Smith, 1970)

ESSLIN, Martin, *Pinter: A Study of his Plays*, rev. edn (London: Eyre Methuen, 1978)

ESSLIN, Martin, ed., *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965)

ESSLIN, Martin, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (London: Eyre and Spottiswode, 1962)

ESSLIN, Martin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Pelican, 1980)

FINDLATER, Richard, ed., *At the Royal Court: 25 Years of the English Stage Company* (Ambergate: Amber Lane Press, 1981)

FURNESS, R.S., *Expressionism* (London: Methuen, 1973)

GABBARD, Lucina Paquet, *The Dream Structure of Pinter's Plays: A Psychoanalytic Approach* (London: Associated University Presses, 1976)

GALE, Steven H., *Butter's Going Up: A Critical Analysis of Harold Pinter's Work* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1977)

GANZ, Arthur, *George Bernard Shaw* (London: Macmillan, 1983)

GANZ, Arthur, ed., *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972)

GASCOIGNE, Bamber, *Twentieth-Century Drama* (London: Hutchinson, 1962)

GASKILL, William, *A Sense of Direction* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988)

GAYE, Freda, ed., *Who's Who in the Theatre*, 13th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1961)

GAYE, Freda, ed., *Who's Who in the Theatre*, 14th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1967)

GOODALL, Jane, *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994)

GOORNEY, Howard, *The Theatre Workshop Story* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981)

GOORNEY, Howard and Ewan MacColl, eds, *Agit-Prop to Theatre Workshop: Political Playscripts 1930-50* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986)

GROSSVOGEL, David I., *Four Playwrights and a Postscript* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1962)

GUSSOW, Mel, *Conversations with Pinter* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1994)

HARTNOLL, Phyllis, ed., *The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972)

HAYMAN, Ronald, *Artaud and After* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977)

HAYMAN, Ronald, *British Theatre Since 1955: A Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979)

HAYMAN, Ronald, *Theatre and Anti-Theatre: New Movements Since Beckett* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1979)

HAYMAN, Ronald, *Harold Pinter* (London: Heinemann, 1980)

HINCHLIFFE, Arnold P., *British Theatre, 1950-70* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1974)

HINCHLIFFE, Arnold P., *The Absurd* (London: Methuen, 1969)

HOBSON, Harold, ed., *International Theatre Annual*, 5 (London: John Calder, 1961)

HOBSON, Harold, *Theatre in Britain, 1920-1983: A Personal View* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1984)

INNES, Christopher, *Avant Garde Theatre, 1892-1992* (London: Routledge, 1993)

INNES, Christopher, *Modern British Drama, 1890-1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

ITZIN, Catherine, *Stages in the Revolution: Political Theatre in Britain Since 1968* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1980)

JACOBS, Nicholas and Prudence Ohlsen, *Bertolt Brecht in Britain* (London: Goethe Institute, 1977)

JENKINS, Anthony, *The Making of Victorian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)

KENNER, Hugh, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study* (London: John Calder, 1962)

KERENSKY, Oleg, *The New British Drama* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1977)

KIRKPATRICK, D.L., ed., *Contemporary Dramatists*, 4th edn (London: St. James Press, 1988)

KITCHIN, Laurence, *Mid-Century Drama* (London: Faber and Faber, 1960)

KITCHIN, Laurence, *Drama in the Sixties: Form and Interpretation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966)

KNOWLSON, James and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull* (London: John Calder, 1979)

LAZAR, Moshe, ed., *The Dream and the Play: Ionesco's Theatrical Quest* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1982)

LLOYD EVANS, Gareth, *The Language of Modern Drama* (London: Dent, 1977)

LLOYD EVANS, Gareth and Barbara Lloyd Evans, eds, *Plays in Review 1956-1980: British Drama and the Critics* (London: Batsford, 1985)

LUMLEY, Frederick, *New Trends in Twentieth Century Drama: A Survey since Ibsen and Shaw*, 3rd rev. edn (London: Barrie and Rockliff, 1967)

MALKIN, Jeanette R., *Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992)

MARLAND, Michael, ed., *Laughter and Fear: Nine One-Act Plays by David Campton* (London: Blackie, 1969)

MAROWITZ, Charles, *Confessions of a Counterfeit Critic: A London Theatre Notebook, 1958-1971* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1973)

MAROWITZ, Charles, and others, eds, *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama* (London: Methuen, 1965)

MAROWITZ, Charles and Simon Trussler, eds, *Theatre at Work: Playwrights and Productions in the Modern British Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1967)

MAY, Robin, *A Companion to the Theatre: The Anglo-American Stage from 1920* (London: Lutterworth, 1973)

MCCANN, John J., *The Theatre of Arthur Adamov* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1975)

MCDONALD, Jan, *The 'New Drama' 1900-1914* (London: Macmillan, 1986)

NICOLL, Allardyce, *British Drama* (London: Harrap, 1978)

NICOLL, Allardyce, *English Drama: A Modern Viewpoint* (London: Harrap, 1968)

NICOLL, Allardyce, ed., *World Drama* (London: Harrap, 1976)

NIGHTINGALE, Benedict, *A Reader's Guide to Fifty Modern British Plays*, Heinemann Educational Books (London: Heinemann, 1982)

ORR, John and Dragan Klaic, eds, *Terrorism and Modern Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990)

PAGE, Malcolm, *File on Pinter* (London: Methuen, 1993)

PARKER, John, ed., *Who's Who in the Theatre*, 11th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1952)

PARKER, John, ed., *Who's Who in the Theatre*, 12th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1957)

PODOL, Peter L., *Fernando Arrabal* (Boston: Twayne, 1978)

POWELL, Kerry, *Oscar Wilde and the Theatre of the 1890s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990)

REILLY, John H., *Arthur Adamov* (New York: Twayne, 1974)

ROBERTS, Philip, *The Royal Court Theatre, 1965-1972* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986)

SCOTT, Michael, ed., *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party; The Caretaker; The Homecoming*, Casebook Series (London: Macmillan, 1986)

SCUDAMORE, Pauline, *Spike Milligan: A Biography* (London: Granada, 1985)

STOURAC, Richard and Kathleen McCreery, eds, *Theatre as a Weapon: Workers' Theatre in the Soviet Union, Germany and Britain, 1917-1938* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986)

STRUNK, Volker, *Harold Pinter: Towards a Poetics of His Plays* (New York: Peter Lang, 1989)

STYAN, J.L., *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 1: Realism and Naturalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)

STYAN, J.L., *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 2: Symbolism, Surrealism and the Absurd* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)

STYAN, J.L., *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice 3: Expressionism and Epic Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981)

STYAN, J.L., *The Dark Comedy: The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962)

TAYLOR, John Russell, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1962)

TAYLOR, John Russell, *Anger and After: A Guide to the New British Drama*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Methuen, 1969)

TAYLOR, John Russell, *The Penguin Dictionary of Theatre*, rev. edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970)

TAYLOR, John Russell, *The Second Wave: British Drama in the Sixties* (London: Methuen, 1978)

TOOK, Barry, *Laughter in the Air: An Informal History of British Radio Comedy*, rev. edn (London: Robson, 1981)

TREWIN, J.C., *Drama in Britain, 1951-1964* (London: Longman, 1965)

TRUSSLER Simon, *The Plays of Harold Pinter: An Assessment* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973)

TRUSSLER, Simon, ed., *Twentieth Century Drama* (London: Macmillan, 1983)

TSCHUDIN, Marcus, *A Writer's Theatre: George Devine and the English Stage Company at the Royal Court 1956-1965*, European University Papers (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1972)

TYNAN, Kenneth, *A View of the English Stage* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975)

TYNAN, Kenneth, *Right and Left* (London: Longman, 1967)

TYNAN, Kenneth, *Tynan on Theatre* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1964)

VINSON, James, ed., *Contemporary Dramatists* (London: St James Press, 1973)

VINSON, James, ed., *Contemporary Dramatists*, 2nd edn (London: St James Press, 1977)

WAGER, Walter, ed., *The Playwrights Speak* (London: Longman, 1969)

WANDOR, Michelene, *Look Back in Gender: Sexuality and the Family in Post-War British Drama* (London: Methuen, 1987)

WARDLE, Irving, *The Theatres of George Devine* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1979)

WELLWARTH, George E., *The Theatre of Protest and Paradox: Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama* (London: Macgibbon and Kee, 1965)

WILMUT, Roger, *The Goon Show Companion: A History and Goonography* (London: Robson, 1981)

WORTH, Katherine, *Revolutions in Modern Drama* (London: G. Bell, 1972)

(ii) Articles

ANDERS, Günther, 'Being without Time: On Samuel Beckett's Play *Waiting for Godot* ', in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1965), pp. 140-51

ANDERSON, Lindsay, 'Get out and push!', in *Declaration*, ed. by Lindsay Anderson and Kenneth Tynan (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1957), pp. 153-78

ANDERSON, Lindsay, 'Pre-Renaissance', in *International Theatre Annual*, 5, ed. by Harold Hobson (London: John Calder, 1961), pp. 170-86

ANDERSON, Michael, 'David Campton', in *A Handbook of Contemporary Drama*, ed. by Michael Anderson and others (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1972), pp. 81-2

ANDERSON, Michael, 'James Saunders', in *A Handbook of Contemporary Drama*, ed. by Michael Anderson and others (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1972), pp. 395-6

ANDERSON, Michael, 'N.F. Simpson', in *A Handbook of Contemporary Drama*, ed. by Michael Anderson and others (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1972), pp. 409-10

APPLEYARD, Bryan, 'The New Light that Burns within Harold Pinter', *The Times*, 16 March 1984, 13

ARMSTRONG, William A., 'Preface', in *Experimental Drama*, ed. by William A. Armstrong (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1963), pp. 9-14

BATH, Michael, 'Interview with David Campton', in *New Theatre Magazine*, 10.3 (1970), 16-20

BENSKY, Lawrence M., 'An Interview with Harold Pinter', in *Theatre at Work: Playwrights and Productions in the Modern British Theatre*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and Simon Trussler (London: Methuen, 1967), pp. 96-109

BOULTON, James T., 'Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker* and Other Plays', in *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Arthur Ganz (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 93-104.

BOWEN, John, 'Accepting the Illusion', *The Twentieth Century*, 169.1008 (1961), 153-65

BRATER, Enoch, 'After the Absurd: Rethinking Realism and a Few Other Isms', in *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, ed. by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 293-301

BRIEN, Alan, 'Introduction', in *New English Dramatists* 5 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 7-11

BROWN, John Russell, 'Beckett and the Art of the Nonplus', in *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, ed. by Enoch Brater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 25-45

CALLEN, Anthony, 'Stoppard's *Godot*: Some French Influences on Post-War English Drama', in *New Theatre Magazine*, 10.1 (1969), 22-30

CLEVELAND, Louise O., 'Giles Cooper', *Theatrefacts*, 4 (1975), 3-14

COHN, Ruby, 'Growing (Up?) with Godot', in *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, ed. by Enoch Brater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 13-24

COHN, Ruby, 'Introduction: Around the Absurd', in *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, ed. by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 1-9

COHN, Ruby, 'The World of Harold Pinter', in *Pinter: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Arthur Ganz (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 78-92

DACE, Tish, 'James Saunders', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 462-5

DEVINE, George, 'The Berliner Ensemble', in *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and others (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 14-18

DUKORE, Bernard F., 'Peter Barnes and the Problem of Goodness', in *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, ed. by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 155-74

DUKORE, Bernard F., 'The Theatre of Ionesco: A Union of Form and Substance', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 13.3 (1961), 174-81

ELSOM, John, 'Barry Bermange', *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 50-2

ELSOM, John, 'John Grillo', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 216-18

ESSLIN, Martin, 'Brecht and the English Theatre', in *Tulane Drama Review*, 11.2 (1966), 63-70

ESSLIN, Martin, 'Godot and his Children: the Theatre of Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter', in *Experimental Drama*, ed. by William A. Armstrong (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1963), pp. 128-46

ESSLIN, Martin, 'Introduction', in *Absurd Drama*, ed. by Martin Esslin (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 7-23

ETON, Peter, 'Introduction', in *The Book of the Goons*, ed. by Spike Milligan (London: Robson, 1984), pp. 9-11

FORD, Anna, 'Harold Pinter's Radical Departures', *The Listener*, 27 October 1988, 4-6

GAYE, Freda, 'London Playbills, 1955-1960', in *Who's Who in the Theatre*, ed. by Freda Gaye, 13th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1961), pp. 11-139

GAYE, Freda, 'London Playbills, 1961-1966', in *Who's Who in the Theatre*, ed. by Freda Gaye, 14th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1967), pp. 87-175

GILLETT, Eric, 'Regional Realism: Shelagh Delaney, Alun Owen, Keith Waterhouse and Willis Hall', in *Experimental Drama*, ed. by William A. Armstrong (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1963), pp. 186-203

GORDON, Lois, 'Harold Pinter', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by K. A. Berney, 5th edn (London: St James Press, 1993), pp. 529-34

GRAHAM-WHITE, Anthony, 'David Campton', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 78-81

GREER, Germaine, 'One Kind of Undergraduate Theatre', *The Cambridge Review*, May (1965), 457-9

GROSS, Miriam, 'Pinter on Pinter', *The Observer*, 5 October 1980, 25 and 27

GUPTARA, Prabhu, 'John Antrobus', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 18-20

GUSSOW, Mel, 'Pinter's Plays Following Him Out of Enigma and Into Politics', *The New York Times*, 6 December 1988, 17 and 22

HALL, Stuart, 'Beyond Naturalism Pure', in *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and others (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 212-20

HAMMOND, Jonathan, 'A Potted History of the Fringe', *Theatre Quarterly*, 3.12 (1973), 37-46

HAMMOND, Jonathan, 'James Saunders', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson, 2nd edn (London: St James Press, 1977), pp. 692-5

HERN, Nicholas, 'A Play and its Politics: A Conversation between Harold Pinter and Nicholas Hern', in *One for the Road* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 7-23

HOBSON, Harold, 'The Birthday Party', in *Post-War British Theatre Criticism*, ed. by John Elsom (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 84-6

HOBSON, Harold, 'Next Time I'll Sing to You', in *Plays in Review, 1956-1980*, ed. by Gareth and Barbara Lloyd Evans (London: Batsford, 1985), pp. 117-19

JONES, Mervyn, 'Introduction', in *New English Dramatists* 11 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967), pp. 7-18

KNOWLSON, James, 'Tradition and Innovation in Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*', in *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, ed. by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 57-71

KOSTELANETZ, Richard, 'You'll Come to Love Your Sperm Test', in *Encore*, 12.2 (1965), 46-8

LAING, Stuart, 'Introduction', in *Mercer, Plays: One* (London: Methuen, 1990), pp. ix-xviii

LAMBERT, J.W., 'Introduction', in *New English Dramatists* 7 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), pp. 7-13

LAMONT, Rosette C., 'Journey to the Kingdom of the Dead: Ionesco's Gnostic Dream Play', in *The Dream and the Play: Ionesco's Theatrical Quest*, ed. by Moshe Lazar (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1982), pp. 93-119

LAWLEY, Paul, 'David Rudkin', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by K.A. Berney, 5th edn (London: St James Press, 1993), pp. 570-72

LEECH, Clifford, 'Two Romantics: Arnold Wesker and Harold Pinter', in *Contemporary Theatre*, Stratford-Upon-Avon-Studies 4, ed. by John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), pp. 11-31

LEWIS, Peter, 'Radio Writers', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 605-8

LITTLEWOOD, Joan, 'Goodbye Note from Joan', in *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and others (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 132-4

LLOYD EVANS, Gareth, 'Post-War Drama in England and Ireland', in *World Drama*, ed. by Allardyce Nicoll (London: Harrap, 1976), pp. 806-20

MAROWITZ, Charles, 'Anti-Ionesco Theatre', in *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and others (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 160-4

MAROWITZ, Charles, 'Next Time I'll Sing to You', in *Plays in Review, 1956-1980*, ed. by Gareth and Barbara Lloyd Evans (London: Batsford, 1985), pp. 116-17

MAROWITZ, Charles, 'State of Play', in *Tulane Drama Review*, 11.2 (1966), 203-6

MCWHINNIE, Donald, 'Introduction', in *Barry Bermange: No Quarter and The Interview* (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 7-9

MCWHINNIE, Donald, 'Comic Mask, Cruel World: the Plays of Giles Cooper', *Theatre Quarterly*, 16 (1975), 51-4

MILNE, Tom, 'The Hidden Face of Violence', in *Encore*, 7.1 (1960), 14-20

MILNE, Tom and Clive Goodwin, 'Working with Joan', in *Theatre at Work: Playwrights and Productions in the Modern British Theatre*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and Simon Trussler (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 113-22

NIGHTINGALE, Benedict, 'David Campton', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson, 2nd edn (London: St James Press, 1977), pp. 131-5

NIGHTINGALE, Benedict, 'Harold Pinter/Politics', in *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, ed. by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 129-54

OLIVER, William I., 'Between Absurdity and the Playwright', *Educational Theatre Journal*, 15.3 (1963), 224-35

ORR, John, 'Terrorism and Social Drama and Dramatic Form', in *Terrorism and Modern Drama*, ed. by John Orr and Dragan Klaic (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), pp. 48-63

PAGE, Malcolm, 'Ann Jellicoe', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 278-9

PARKER, John, 'London Playbills, 1950-1955', in *Who's Who in the Theatre*, ed. by John Parker, 12th edn (London: Sir Isaac Pitman and Sons, 1957), pp. 142-76

POUNTNEY, Rosemary, 'N.F. Simpson', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by K.A. Berney, 5th edn (London: St James Press, 1993), pp. 613-15

PURSER, Philip, 'A Pint with Pinter Helps to Dispel the Mystery', *News Chronicle*, 28 July 1960, 6

RAYNOR, Henry, 'Johnny Speight', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 496-8

ROOSE-EVANS, James, 'James Hanley', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson (London: St James Press, 1973), pp. 345-9

ROSENFELD, L.B., 'The Absurd in Camus' *Caligula*', in *New Theatre Magazine*, 8.2 (1968), 10-16

SCHECHNER, Richard, 'The Inner and the Outer Reality', in *Tulane Drama Review*, 7.3 (1963), 187-217

SMITH, R.D., 'Back to the Text', in *Contemporary Theatre*, Stratford-Upon-Avon-Studies 4, ed. by John Russell Brown and Bernard Harris (London: Edward Arnold, 1962), pp. 116-37

SPURLING, John, 'Stanley Eveling', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 145-7

STRACHAN, Alan, 'John Antrobus', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson, 2nd edn (London: St James Press, 1977), pp. 37-40

TAYLOR, John Russell, 'Ann Jellicoe', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by James Vinson (London: St James Press, 1973), pp. 409-13

TAYLOR, John Russell, 'A Room and Some Views: Harold Pinter', in *Pinter, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Arthur Ganz (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1972), pp. 105-22

TAYLOR, John Russell, 'Introduction', in *New English Dramatists* 8 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), pp. 7-13

TAYLOR, John Russell, 'The Cloud', in *Encore*, 11.2 (1964), 52-4

TODD, Sue, 'Ann Jellicoe Talks to Sue Todd', in *The Knack and The Sport of My Mad Mother* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), pp. 9-23

TREWIN, J.C., 'N.F. Simpson', in *Contemporary Dramatists*, ed. by D.L. Kirkpatrick, 4th edn (London: St James Press, 1988), pp. 487-90

TYNAN, Kenneth, 'Preface', in *The Observer Plays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1958), pp. 7-12

TYNAN, Kenneth, 'Theatre and Living', in *Declaration*, ed. by Lindsay Anderson and Kenneth Tynan (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1957), pp. 107-29

WARDLE, Irving, 'Comedy of Menace', in *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and others (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 86-91

WARDLE, Irving, 'Introduction', in *New English Dramatists* 12 (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), pp. 7-21

WARDLE, Irving, 'The Territorial Struggle', in *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party; The Caretaker; The Homecoming*, ed. by Michael Scott (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 169-71

WATT, David, 'Class Report', in *The Encore Reader: A Chronicle of the New Drama*, ed. by Charles Marowitz and others (London: Methuen, 1965), pp. 56-62

WELLWARTH, George E., 'Beyond Realism: Ionesco's Theory of the Drama', in *The Dream and the Play: Ionesco's Theatrical Quest*, ed. by Moshe Lazar (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1982), pp. 33-47

WHITAKER, Thomas, R., '"Wham, Bam, Thank You Sam": the Presence of Beckett', in *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, ed. by Enoch Brater (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 208-29

WILLISON, Sheila, 'The Language of the Absurd: Artaud and Ionesco', in *New Theatre Magazine*, 7.1 (1966), 9-14

WOODROFFE, Graham, 'Taking Care of the "Coloureds": The Political Metaphor of Harold Pinter's *The Caretaker* ', *Theatre Journal*, 40.4 (1988), 498-508

WORTH, Katherine, 'Avant Garde at the Royal Court: John Arden and N.F. Simpson', in *Experimental Drama*, ed. by William A. Armstrong (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1963), pp. 204-23

WORTH, Katherine, 'Pinter and the Realist Tradition', in *Harold Pinter: The Birthday Party; The Caretaker; The Homecoming*, ed. by Michael Scott (London: Macmillan, 1986), pp. 29-39

ZEIFMAN, Hersh, 'A Trick of the Light: Tom Stoppard's *Hapgood* and Postabsurdist Theatre', in *Around the Absurd: Essays on Modern and Postmodern Drama*, ed. by Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1990), pp. 175-201